YANG SU
There's Something Wrong with the Chief
DU ZHU YOU BING
3

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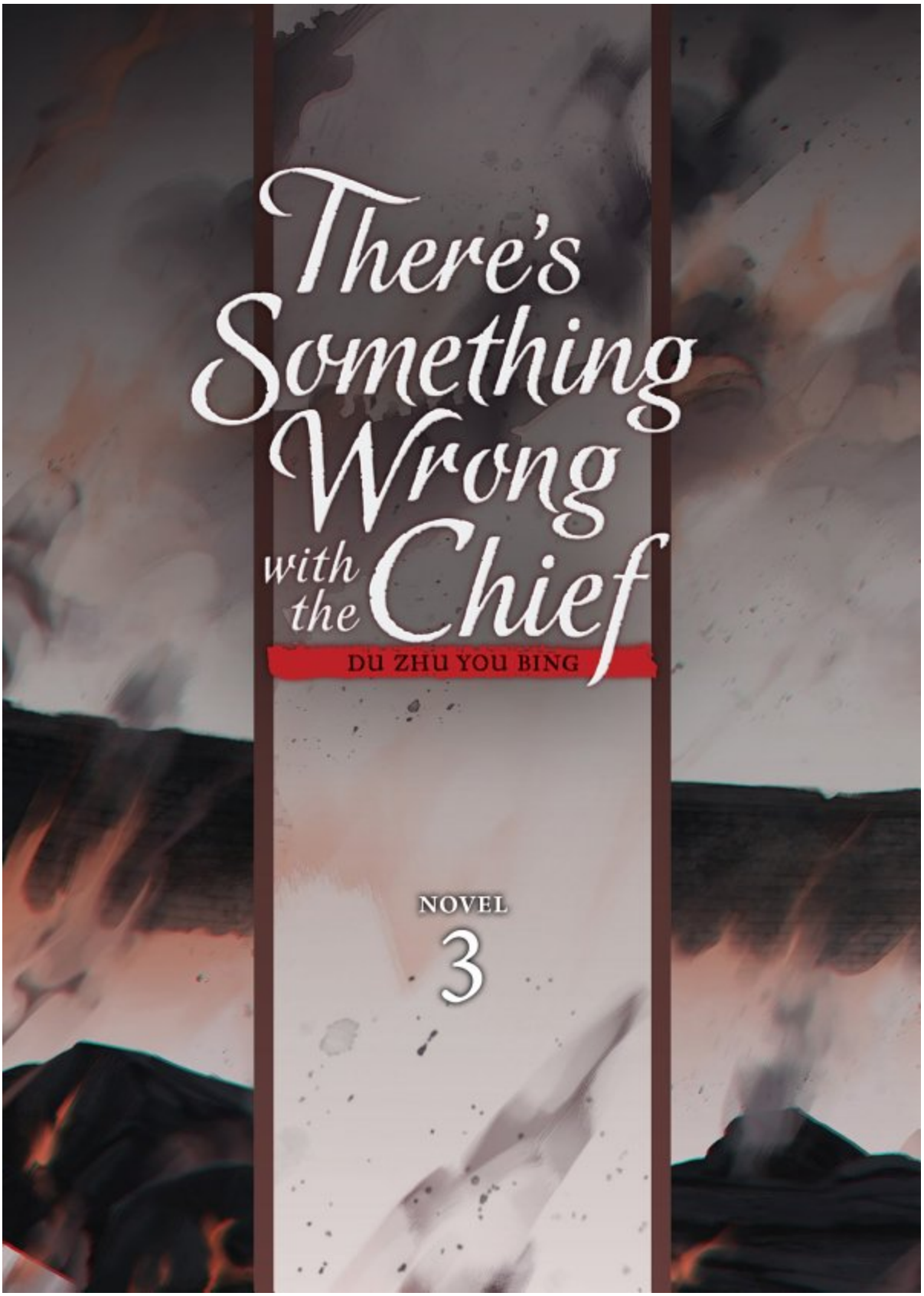
There's Something Wrong with the Chief
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NOVEL
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There's Something Wrong with the Chief

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NOVEL

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THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH THE CHIEF: DU ZHU YOU BING (NOVEL) VOL. 3

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Chapter 62:
Frost and Dew at Night

MIDWAY THROUGH THE JOURNEY, Shen Jue abandoned the carriage and remounted his horse, spurring it back to the capital at full speed. Seeing his companion's improved complexion, Xiahou Lian didn't insist that he remain in the carriage. When the party reached the capital, they dropped Xiahou Lian and Zhu Shunzi off at Yunxian Tower before disappearing to unknown locations—though whether they left covert watchers remained unclear. Before departing, Situ Jin warned Xiahou Lian, "Keep your gates shut for the next few days. Don't venture out."

Xiahou Lian knew that trouble was brewing in the capital, but he didn't have the chance to ponder Situ Jin's words. Upon returning to Yunxian Tower, he fell ill—the wounds on his back had gone too long without proper treatment and were now festering and inflamed. When A-Chu cut away his blood-crusted shirt, she was so horrified at the sight of his scarred back that she dropped her scissors and nearly impaled her thigh. She hastily sent Zhu Shunzi to fetch a doctor and medicine. Over eight days of grueling torment passed before Xiahou Lian gradually began to recover.

***

WHEN A-CHU'S YOUNG MAID returned from purchasing medicine, she clicked her tongue. There were many soldiers and members of the Embroidered Uniform Guard wandering outside, she told them, fierce and clamorous enough to frighten anyone to death.

A few days later, the capital issued a ban on iron and implemented a curfew. Business at Yunxian Tower declined sharply—patrons stopped visiting, and even the usual bouncers at the door were dismissed. The brothel's owner and the girls passed the time playing mahjong in the courtyard.

Xiahou Lian remained bedridden, dependent on A-Chu and her young maid for news from outside. Their reports all concerned the Eastern Depot's agents, the Embroidered Uniform Guard, the Five-City Garrison Command, and how inspections at the city gates had gotten much stricter—now they not only demanded travel permits but also conducted body searches. There was no news of Shen Jue at all; he and his thirty or forty men appeared to have vanished into thin air. Xiahou Lian comforted himself by thinking that no news was good news.

As night fell on the day after the autumn equinox, men's shouts erupted outside, accompanied by the clang of armored boots and the metallic clatter of weaponry. Black smoke billowed into the sky as fires broke out across the capital. The girls of Yunxian Tower huddled beneath the veranda, standing on tiptoe to gaze fearfully at the glowing crimson sky. The madam ordered servants and thugs to watch the gates. Someone bravely peeked through the crack in the door and reported that soldiers had arrested a number of men and women, and that there was blood on the streets.

"Something must've happened in the palace," the madam said, waving her fan vigorously. "Times are changing, and those who backed the wrong side are done for!"

"Are they arresting people who backed the wrong side? Were those people supporting the first prince, or the second prince?" one girl asked, clutching her chest. "I wonder how my idiot lover is doing—last month, he got drunk and muttered something about the prince of Fu being the most promising candidate. He claimed the prince was certain to inherit the throne."

The madam spoke with great aplomb. "Who cares?! The heavens could change hands, and it wouldn't stop me from running my business. The chaos will end in a few days, anyway, and we'll see whether your lover comes knocking. You'll know then, won't you?"

Xiahou Lian slipped away from the chattering women and sat beneath the grape trellis, rubbing Shen Jue's prayer beads between his fingers. *May the heavens protect Shen Jue. May he be safe and sound, and may his wishes come true.*

***

IN THE FORBIDDEN CITY, darkness pressed down heavily. Rows of cowhide lanterns lined the vermilion walls, their fist-sized lights pooling on the ground like shattered flecks of gold scattered across the dark gray bricks. Tonight's gloom seemed unusually thick—even the palace lanterns illuminated only tiny patches, leaving most areas swallowed in shadow. The eunuch guarding the palace gate stood with his head bowed, half-hidden in darkness and nearly invisible unless one looked closely.

Only the occasional chirp of insects broke the silence in the palace. Suddenly, hurried footsteps echoed, and the clanking of armor grew louder. The eunuch jolted as if startled, lifting his head to peer down the path, when a black arrow whistled through the air and instantly pierced his fragile skull. The eunuch collapsed, his blood spreading across the green bricks, his lifeless black eyes reflecting Wei De, the prince of Fu, and the imperial guards as they rushed past.

Lights blazed brightly inside Qianqing Palace. The emperor preferred illumination and even kept a lantern lit while he slept. The old man leaned against the dragon-and-phoenix bedpost. His canopy and bedding were all bright-yellow satin; the entire space was awash in radiant colors. Yet the emperor himself had irreversibly dimmed—his face ashen, he struggled for breath like a candle flame guttering in a cold wind, about to go out.

Empress Zhang sat on the throne, her wrist adorned with a string of agarwood prayer beads that she counted one by one as she coldly watched Noble Consort Li give the emperor medicine. The ten-year-old second prince sat on a footstool and loudly recited poetry, his childish voice echoing through the palace—the only spark of life in a place that reeked of medicine and death. Empress Zhang exhaled slowly. Those three looked so harmonious, like a perfect family, while she stood apart, an outsider.

The rift between emperor and empress was no recent matter. Over a decade had passed since His Majesty last set foot in the empress's chambers. Once she fell from favor, consorts took her place. When one died, another rose; at any rate, the empress was never in the running. *So be it*, thought Empress Zhang, adjusting her elaborate hairstyle and its phoenix

hairpins, then standing. In this life, who could rely solely on love? Such a fleeting, insubstantial thing—she had no use for it.

The imperial physician finished taking the emperor's pulse, then knelt back and pressed his forehead to the floor. "Your Majesty's tongue is red, your limbs cold, and your pulse weak. The illness appears graver than yesterday." He weighed his words carefully, but his roundabout phrasing made it clear to all that there was no curing the emperor. Only death awaited him. Trembling, the physician awaited the emperor's response.

The emperor waved a hand. "Leave us, then. I've reached the end of my years. Life and death are heaven's affair—mortals cannot control such things. If heaven summons me now to meet my ancestors, so be it."

"Your Majesty!" Consort Li cried tearfully.

The second prince stopped reciting and looked up at his father in confusion.

"Mu Heng," the emperor said, taking the small prince's hand in his own, "listen to your mother. Listen to your tutors. The future…rests on you now." The elderly emperor had yet to name an heir, and his words now suggested that he intended to pass the throne to this unweaned child.

Empress Zhang's heart lurched. She forced a smile. "Your Majesty, what nonsense is this? The second prince is still so young. Let him focus on his studies and grow strong and wise. The burdens of state should fall to us adults—why trouble him?"

The emperor glanced at her, and his cold gaze made her shiver. Unconsciously, she stepped back, letting her maids steady her. The emperor's sagging skin trembled as he rasped, "Then who, in your opinion, should bear this burden?"

Straightening slightly, Empress Zhang declared, "Your Majesty, the answer is plain—you simply refuse to see it. The second prince is only ten! What can a child of ten do? He can't even recognize most characters! My son, Mu Chen, is dignified, intelligent, and capable. Since he took his fief, his lands have been peaceful and their people prosperous. He has never made a single mistake! Yet because of a mere limp, you've cast him aside like rubbish!"

The emperor’s expression darkened. He gritted his teeth and snapped, “So what if he’s ten? In four years, he’ll be fourteen—the same age I was when I took the throne! Mu Chen? How dare you mention Mu Chen?! I gave him chances! His limp pained me too! But that boy—all he cares about is pleasure! Is there a single brothel in the capital he hasn’t visited? The brazen creatures from Yunxian Tower even came to the palace gates to collect on his debts! Your son has shamed the imperial family!”

Empress Zhang sneered. “As if *you’ve* never indulged! With the Embroidered Uniform Guard protecting you and the Eastern Depot covering your tracks, you snuck out disguised as a common nobleman to cavort with your shameless paramours and returned still reeking of their perfume! Did you think I didn’t notice? To see whose veins your blood runs in, look no further than Mu Chen!”

Her words made everyone in the hall bow their heads even lower, pretending they could neither hear nor see.

“You—you—hold your tongue!” snarled the enraged emperor, spitting blood.

Consort Li gasped, hastily stroking his chest. “Empress, please!” she wept. “His Majesty cannot endure such agitation!”

Who in this life hadn’t had their share of folly? An emperor’s indiscretions might eventually become romantic legends, but they were not to be spoken aloud here and now. Empress Zhang, however was beyond all restraint and had torn away all pretense.

“My Chen-er has the support of the court and the people. Whether you name him your heir or not, he will rule!” Empress Zhang declared imperiously. “Chen-er, step forward!”

“May Father enjoy good health,” said the prince of Fu, emerging from behind a dragon-and-phoenix screen. He bowed to the emperor with a smile. As he entered, his massive frame seemed to shrink the hall; his shadow loomed over the walls and ceiling, pressing down like a physical weight. The physicians, maids, and eunuchs felt the room darken as the air grew stifling.

Wei De approached carrying a tray that bore paper and a brush. He presented it reverently to the emperor. “Your Majesty, name the prince of

Fu as your heir. The Grand Secretaries and Six Ministers all kneel outside, weeping their pleas. The succession will affect the dynasty's foundation and the nation's peace. This lowly servant dares beg Your Majesty to decide swiftly!"

The prince of Fu clasped his hands behind his back. "Indeed, Father, it would be best act quickly while you still can—the ministers are waiting. Why must you be so stubborn? Unless…you're worried about my younger brother and his mother? Rest assured, I will care for them most tenderly."

Silence filled the hall. The physicians shrank back, hiding behind curtains and striving for invisibility. The emperor stared at the tray in Wei De's hands. The old eunuch's head was meekly bowed, his black gauze hat casting shadows over his face.

The emperor sighed deeply.

"Old companion of mine… When I was a child, and my tutor caned my palms, you wept as you held my hands and blew on them to ease my pain. Never did I imagine this day would come."

Wei De's lips curled into his usual faultlessly deferential smile—one the emperor had seen for decades but only now realized never reached Wei De's eyes. "All people change, Your Majesty. This servant is but drifting duckweed, incomparable to Your Majesty's eminence. Your Majesty is a towering, luxuriant tree, and I am merely the vine that clings to your trunk. Should you wither, I shall still wish to live, and I shall be forced to seek out another tree. What choice do I have?"

The two old friends—one seated, one kneeling—seemed frozen in time. The emperor's aged face seemed to grow more withered, his entire being steeped in the gray pallor of death.

"If you refuse to write the edict, Father, do not blame me if my second brother and his mother meet unfortunate ends!" the prince of Fu snapped impatiently.

The emperor glared at him. "Silence, beast! I am not dead yet! Without my decree, you will always be a usurping rat—an illegitimate ruler!"

Unruffled, the prince of Fu set down a pillow and seated himself on the throne behind the screen. "Very well. Have it your way. The palace is

already mine, though. Why not poke your head out and see for yourself?”

Only then did the emperor and Consort Li realize that the darkness outside had lightened—not with dawn but with the torches held by soldiers. Qianqing Palace was surrounded; escape was impossible. The emperor slumped back, his face like that of a corpse, his fingers trembling.

Then a scream tore through the silent night, echoing across the Forbidden City as chaos erupted outside. Wei De whirled around. “What’s happening?!”

The commander of the imperial guard burst in. “Reporting an emergency! The Three Great Camps[1] have stormed the palace, led by Shen Jue! They’ve already breached Xuanwu Gate!”

Chapter 63:
A Heart of Snow and Ice

A BLAZING SIGNAL ARROW SHOT through the dark night, flying toward the heart of the imperial palace. Wei De, the empress, and the prince of Fu went ashen as the thunderous drumbeat of hooves echoed from afar. Soon, the sounds of battle erupted outside Qianqing Palace—steel clashed, flames roared, and flickering light and shadow danced across the terrified faces of everyone in the chamber.

"Quick, kill the second prince!" Wei De shrieked.

"No!" Consort Li screamed, clutching her child.

"I'll do it!" the prince of Fu bellowed.

He seized the second prince by the collar to tear him from his mother's arms, but Consort Li clung desperately to her child, who wailed in terror. Wei De rushed forward and dragged her back while the prince of Fu hauled the boy into the main hall. He drew his saber, its cold gleam reflected in the second prince's petrified eyes. The frail child trembled like a fledgling sparrow caught in a storm. Crying out in protest, the palace maids and eunuchs threw themselves at the prince of Fu, grabbing at his arms and legs.

"Who dares interfere? Stand down!" Empress Zhang roared. "Kill them, Chen-er! Kill them all!"

The prince of Fu only struggled, refusing to strike.

"Hurry, Your Highness!" Wei De urged.

Just then, a single arrow glittering with frost shot through a door's papered lattice and pierced the black gauze hat of the prince of Fu. He froze. As Empress Zhang looked on in horror, a thick rivulet of blood slithered down his plump, pale cheek like a crimson serpent, filling those present with suffocating terror. The eunuchs and maids snatched the second prince away as the prince of Fu collapsed heavily to the ground.

"No!" Empress Zhang shrieked.

The vermilion doors burst open, and a tall man strode into the lamplight. The moment he entered, all the illumination in the hall seemed to converge on him—the gold thread of the pythons embroidered on his robe shimmered, each strand flowing with quiet radiance. The glow bathing the tall man's face revealed his delicate, refined features.

"Your Majesty, your servant apologizes for his tardiness in rescuing you!" Shen Jue bowed, his smile flawless.

Behind him, Situ Jin—who held a bow—also bowed. Wei De's lips trembled as he pointed at Shen Jue, but he spoke no words.

The old emperor stared at the prince of Fu's corpse. A single tear glistening like candlelight traced down his withered face. Like a silent tide, the sorrow of an emperor surged through the dying old man. "You aren't at all tardy, Chief Shen—you've arrived just in time." The emperor struggled upright. "Years ago, my three brothers fought to the death over this throne. I had only two sons, and yet they still couldn't escape the same fate." He turned to Wei De and continued calmly, "Old friend, I knew long ago of your conspiracy with the empress. That is why I secretly gave Shen Jue the tiger tally. I sent him to Nanjing to evade your spies and await the right moment to return and save me. I still hoped you would repent, right up until the very end. Now I see my hope was futile."

Wei De removed his gold-trimmed black hat and knelt upon the ground. He knew he had lost completely. At this point, there was nothing left to say. He had gambled and would now accept defeat.

Pressing his forehead to the back of his hand, he declared, "For over sixty years, this servant believed himself to be Your Majesty's most trusted confidant. I never imagined Your Majesty would lose trust in me. I forgot that Your Majesty is the emperor! The little Fourth Prince I once protected with my life has long since grown up. Your Majesty, this servant was a fool, abusing your favor to commit unforgivable crimes. I have failed you. Punish me as you will."

The emperor was silent for a long time. Wei De remained prostrate; swallowed by his crimson python robe, his frail body looked even more emaciated. Finally, the emperor spoke. "For sixty years, you stood by my side, both when I was despised in the palace and when I became the

emperor. I can no longer imagine my life without you. After my death, you shall guard my mausoleum."

Wei De shuddered. "Your Majesty…you will spare me?"

"What use would killing you now be? The dead are already lost. More death will only bring more grief. You will atone by guarding my tomb."

Wei De's head remained bowed as if under a thousand-pound weight. Finally, with a heavy thud, he dropped his head to the ground again. "Your servant thanks Your Majesty for his mercy!"

"As for the edict of succession, I prepared it long ago." The emperor pointed to the pillow on the ground. "Shen Jue, tear that pillow open."

Shen Jue obeyed. Inside the apricot-yellow pillow lay an imperial decree. Shen Jue retrieved it and stepped forward, but the emperor waved him off. "Keep it—no need to show me. Leave, all of you. I am tired."

The dragon-and-phoenix candles hissed as they burned. The emperor sat beneath the bed's canopy, its golden satin casting a shadow over his face, which now resembled not a face but a gray, lifeless lump of extinguished charcoal.

The crowd murmured assent and began to withdraw. Empress Zhang, still clutching her son's body, suddenly shrieked. She pulled a handful of cotton stuffing from the prince of Fu's robes and screamed, "This isn't my son, it's a fake! This isn't Chen-er!"

White stuffing spilled out from beneath the "prince's" robes, and his body shrunk rapidly, deflating like a punctured sack. The onlookers gaped in shock, aside from Shen Jue, who remained expressionless. Tucking the decree into his sleeve, he said casually, "The cat's out of the bag. No point lying there—get up."

At those words, the "corpse" scrambled to its feet wearing a sheepish grin. "Commander, it wasn't my fault! Her Majesty hugged me so tight, she squeezed all the stuffing out!" He removed his hat, peeled off a bloody pouch, then ripped away a fleshlike mask to reveal his own jovial face beneath.

Empress Zhang's fingers trembled. "Who—who are you?! Where is the prince?! He's not dead, is he? Tell me!"

The impostor ignored her, stepping behind Situ Jin to vanish into the background.

The emperor sat up straighter, a flush of color returning to his face as if it were a flaring ember. "Shen Jue, what is the meaning of this?! Who is this man? Where is the prince of Fu? Ah—I see. I ordered you not to harm the prince, so you staged this farce using a double. The real one was hidden away safe until this charade could expose the traitors." He smiled faintly. "You've always been cunning. I was right to trust you."

Wei De's expression shifted. "I fear…it is not so simple."

Shen Jue ignored him, bowing instead to Consort Li. "This matter is settled, Your Highness. The second prince is frightened; you should take him to rest."

He'd dismissed the consort and prince without awaiting the emperor's permission—a bold overstep, but the exhausted emperor no longer cared. His weary gaze remained fixed on the man standing before him. Consort Li returned Shen Jue's bow and led the second prince out, carefully closing the doors behind her. The hall was once again left in candlelight and shadow.

Shen Jue stepped across the gleaming floor and onto the footboard of the throne behind the screen, seating himself there leisurely. Fingering the round tourmaline beads on his wrist, he said softly, "I regret to disappoint Your Majesty and Her Majesty, but during our return to the capital, we encountered a flood. His Highness…has already passed. His coffin will arrive shortly."

The emperor slumped, his hands covering his face. After a long silence, his muffled voice emerged from behind them. "So be it. Such is fate. That was not your fault. All of you—leave."

"Your Majesty, you misjudge this beast!" Wei De protested. "Even if the prince had returned safely, he would not have survived! If Shen Jue knew of my plot, why did he not stop it? He has schemes himself!" He glared at Shen Jue. "The prince and I agreed that he would enter the capital in secret, so how did you trick him into following you? Aha—the tiger

tally! You used it to win his trust, didn't you? But once the prince entered the capital, you leaked his whereabouts and had him arrested. Entering without an edict would have landed him in the Imperial Clan Court, ensuring the second prince's succession!"

Shen Jue chuckled softly.

"No, no—arrest alone wouldn't have sufficed. To secure the second prince's throne, the prince of Fu had to die!" Wei De's face twitched. "Shen Jue, what did you truly do?!"

"Simple. I gave the prince of Fu a fake decree."

"Of course! Unauthorized entry alone wouldn't have doomed him, but forging an imperial edict would have! Usurpation and treason—unforgivable crimes!" Wei De sighed. "But the prince died en route, forcing you to stage this farce… Wait. With the first prince dead, the second prince would automatically inherit the throne, so why bother with a fake?" he muttered to himself, then jolted. "You wanted to kill *me*—ensure my execution by proving that I had committed treason! What a scheme, Shen Jue! With the prince dead, and me gone, you would have become a hero—and the next head of the Directorate of Ceremonial. The second prince is a child, and the consort is just a powerless woman. They'd rely on you. You'd control the palace and dominate the court—you'd be the true victor!"

Shen Jue smirked and nodded. "Every word is correct, Father. This plan took much deliberation, yet you grasped it in an instant. But we both misjudged one thing. To think that—despite the prince's forgery and your treason—His Majesty would refuse to sentence you to death!" His smile turned mocking. "Pardoning you for a crime this heavy… His Majesty is truly astoundingly merciful."

The emperor finally understood. They'd all merely been fighting, scheming pawns in Shen Jue's game. In giving Shen Jue the tiger tally, the emperor had armed him. Wei De and the prince of Fu's rebellion had played right into Shen Jue's hands, giving him an excuse to kill the prince. When Mu Heng ascended the throne, he would be Shen Jue's puppet. A eunuch had trampled the imperial family under his heel—and had the empress not exposed the fake prince, they would never have known!

Rage surged in the emperor's chest. Blood sprayed from his lips and spattered Wei De's face. Wei De cried out, steadying the emperor as the old

man gasped for breath. Remembering Consort Li's obedience to Shen Jue, the emperor rasped, "The imperial consort… Is she in league with you?"

"Naturally," replied Shen Jue.

"Ha ha!" Empress Zhang was now hysterical, her long hair disheveled and her phoenix hairpins askew. "How ridiculous this all is, Your Majesty! You, the emperor, and I, the empress, deceived and tricked by a eunuch! You said that Chen-er shamed the imperial family, but this—*this* is true disgrace!"

Wei De gritted his teeth. "Shen Jue, when did you begin conspiring with the consort?"

Shen Jue tilted his head in thought. "About ten years ago. I must thank you for sending her the poisoned ginseng soup, Father. Had you not tried to kill her, I would never have had the opportunity to save her. After that, she had no choice but to fall in with me."

The emperor stiffened, glaring at Wei De. "Poisoned ginseng soup? What poisoned ginseng soup?!"

"Your Majesty, have you forgotten? After the consort gave birth, she was weak. To show her your favor, you sent her ginseng soup daily. But your trusted servant laced it with poison—first nux vomica, then aconite. Slow and undetectable by silver needles."[2]

Shaking with fury, the emperor shoved Wei De away. "Treacherous snakes, all of you! Shen Jue, you dare to scheme against me?! I bestowed all your splendor and riches upon you! I sealed your lofty rank and vast emoluments for you! Instead of repaying me, you abused your power and deceived your ruler, you murderous ingrate! I'll have your worthless head!"

Wei De sighed bitterly. "I thought I raised a dog, but he was a wolf all along. Dogs protect their masters—but wolves devour them. This servant failed you, Your Majesty. I betrayed your grace and nurtured this ruthless beast. Your kindness…I'll only be able to repay it in the next life." With that, Wei De suddenly lunged at Shen Jue, stabbing a dagger the size of a willow leaf toward him.

The blade's cold glint flashed by Shen Jue, casting an icy, frost-like chill upon his face, but he didn't flinch; he didn't so much as bat an eye. With a sharp whistle that sounded like rending silk, a feathered arrow flew

through the air. It pierced Wei De’s temple, then emerged from the other, pinning his skull to the wall. Wei De’s dagger clattered to the ground.

“Old companion!” the emperor howled from behind Wei De, his eyes bulging.

Shen Jue gazed indifferently at the corpse, his expression as remote as that of an unfeeling temple statue.

The emperor’s white hair was disheveled, and tears streamed down his face as he choked out, “Shen Jue, are you satisfied now?! Every last step of your plan succeeded! Chen-er is dead, my old companion is dead—all the obstacles you faced are gone!”

“Not quite,” Shen Jue murmured. “One final step remains.”

The emperor looked up, his clouded eyes meeting Shen Jue’s as the eunuch slowly rose. A bone-deep chill seized the emperor like ice descending from the heavens. Shen Jue’s smile vanished, and he bowed deeply, hands clasped in the most respectful of salutes.

“Your servant Shen Jue dares to request Your Majesty’s abdication!”

Chapter 64:
So Close, Yet Worlds Apart

DURING THE NATIONAL mourning period, the temples' mourning bells tolled from dawn till dusk across the capital—over thirty thousand chimes, a deafening sound that rang in one's ears. White funeral banners filled the streets, and paper money scattered during the procession swirled through the air like a flurry of white butterflies, alighting on faces and shoulders everywhere. Alcohol and meat were prohibited during this period, so the street vendors disappeared and even butchers retreated to their homes. The Five-City Garrison Command maintained a constant daily patrol.

Rouge Lane was as desolate as a graveyard, its doors gaping open to reveal dark, empty halls. Madams and the panders who worked under them leaned against doorframes, sighing at each other. Of everyone in the capital, they were probably the saddest over the late emperor's passing. The new emperor, the second prince, was by all accounts a ten-year-old brat. The common folk didn't much care who sat on the throne; they only hoped the new reign would bring pardons and tax relief.

Shen Jue was the talk of the town. It was said that on the night of the widespread arrests, the prince of Fu and Wei De had attempted a palace coup. In that desperate hour, Shen Jue had rallied the three military camps on the outskirts of the capital to the emperor's rescue, arriving just as the prince of Fu chased down the second prince and attacked him with a saber. Then the prince of Fu was struck down by an arrow fired by Situ Jin, a commander reporting to Shen Jue. Wei De was brought to justice, the empress descended into madness, and the old emperor, utterly drained, entrusted his final edict to Shen Jue and passed away on the spot.

Some praised Shen Jue's loyalty while others called what had happened dumb luck. Regardless, Shen Jue was now the grand secretary of the Directorate of Ceremonial and the Eastern Depot's chief eunuch—second only to the emperor and the most powerful man at court. At the

funeral, Shen Jue rode a white horse; he was clad in plain robes, and his slender frame and cold profile stood out starkly among the sea of mourners.

Of course, Xiahou Lian might have been the only person who thought so. When he began to scan the long procession of officials, he spotted Shen Jue instantly. He was safe, and he'd been promoted. Xiahou Lian's heart settled; Hands behind his back, he ambled back to Yunxian Tower. His wounds had mostly healed; it was time to retrieve Hengbo. He bought a blade from a blacksmith, though his savings only covered the cheapest goose-quill saber. Its gleaming white blade gradually widened from the cross guard before tapering to a gleaming needle point; it was little more than a flat, flimsy sliver of silver.

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XIAHOU LIAN LURKED OUTSIDE the Shen residence for three days, but the vermilion gates remained shut, two white lanterns like ghostly flames glowing faintly under the eaves at night. Shen Jue never returned—unsurprising, given his current position as the head of the eunuchs. He had to oversee everything in the palace. The emperor's death and the new reign's chaos surely afforded him no time to leave the palace.

Reassured, Xiahou Lian chose a night to scale the outer wall. Purely to memorize the property's layout, he conducted three infiltrations, all from the same spot. The first time, he went left, then straight the second time, but each time he failed to locate Shen Jue's study or bedroom. On this third try, he went right.

The grounds were pitch-black, not a single lantern in sight. Shadowy, looming outlines of Taihu rock formations encircled a small pond where ducks flapped noisily. A dark path led to black-tiled, white-walled structures interrupted by fan-shaped openings framing the silhouettes of flowers and leaves. In the night, the white walls appeared gray and the foliage black—it was a world swallowed by shadows.

Xiahou Lian moved forward, groping. The estate was eerily silent, the rooms along the way dark and empty. Only after passing a moon gate

and winding down another walkway did he hear faint human sounds emerge—likely from the servants' quarters. Coughs, spitting, the noise of a shoe scraping phlegm off the floor, the murmurs between a woman and child: one voice crisp, the other tender, but both muted and distant.

Crouching down in the dark, Xiahou Lian detoured around them. Beyond an anteroom, he found several tightly shut doors. Since he'd already passed the servants' rooms, these had to mark the master's quarters. Xiahou Lian paused and pressed his ear to one to confirm that it was empty, then picked the lock and slipped inside.

As Xiahou Lian's eyes adjusted to the darkness, the room's layout grew clear. He was likely in Shen Jue's study. A black-lacquered rosewood desk occupied the center of the room; it was topped with a white porcelain vase holding a single blossom. A sandalwood bookshelf behind it was full of neatly arranged scrolls and books. Two square, four-legged tables flanked the desk: One held a small gilded incense burner, the other a potted plant. As a southerner from Jiangnan, Shen Jue remained untouched by the boorishness of the north despite his time navigating the complexities of the capital. He preferred subtle, refined elegance as serene as a classical landscape painting—replete with the understated beauty of negative space, with a smattering of delicate ink splashes in the corners that imparted a cool, detached, almost otherworldly aura.

Xiahou Lian combed every inch of the study but found no trace of Hengbo; clearly, it wasn't there. He left through another door, traversed a narrow passage, and entered a second chamber. It appeared to be a storage room, crammed full of display racks loaded with a variety of objects. Xiahou Lian approached for a closer look and saw crossbows, daggers, and sleeve arrows. Since when did Shen Jue collect weapons? Puzzled, Xiahou Lian turned and froze. A figure stood just five steps away.

When had they entered? Xiahou Lian hadn't sensed a thing. Sweat dampened his palms as he pressed a hand to his saber hilt. He realized this person must have been here all along. Cursing his carelessness, he retreated slowly. The figure didn't move. Xiahou Lian bolted for the door, yet there was still no movement, no chase. That struck Xiahou Lian as odd. He stood still for a moment, then walked back. The dark figure stood unmoving by the wall, its posture unchanged. Mustering his courage, Xiahou Lian

stepped closer. Bit by bit, the dim light revealed sweeping sleeves, flowing robes, a stark-white porcelain mask, and a glossy braid.

It was Zhaoye.

Xiahou Lian gazed at her, stunned, then returned to examining the objects on the racks. In the gloom earlier, he hadn't recognized them, but every weapon was his own. Another shelf held his blueprints, saber manuals, and even his treasured erotica. Chests with cloud-shaped copper latches were stacked against the wall. Upon opening one, he found it filled with his old clothes: identical black hemp robes, neatly folded to resemble tofu squares. Even his jackets, undergarments, trousers, and handkerchiefs were present. Everything was there.

What the hell is wrong with Shen Jue? Is he collecting my trash? Xiahou Lian hooked a towel toward his nose with one finger and sniffed. *The hell? He even laundered it!*

Xiahou Lian's hideouts must have been compromised. These items had been scattered across his secret bases—the crossbows on the rack had been in Liuzhou, as had Zhaoye, while the robes were from Hangzhou and Jinling. The Eastern Depot's tracking skills were no joke. He couldn't help wondering whether Tang Shiqi had been caught too. Shaking off that thought, Xiahou Lian resumed searching for Hengbo.

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AT THE MAIN GATE of the Shen residence, a white horse-drawn carriage slowly halted. Shen Wenxing placed a small stool beside the carriage, and Shen Jue emerged from behind the curtain to alight upon the stool. The night wind was chilly, and he wore a black cloak patterned with flowing clouds that made his already pale face appear even more pallid.

Shen Wenxing walked ahead carrying a crimson silk lantern, its glow on the ground like spilled rouge. Shen Jue treaded slowly over the "rouge," his footsteps silent in the sparsely populated mansion. His estate retained a southern layout and aesthetic unlike the thick-walled, heavy-roofed residences of the north. During its construction, he had specifically

instructed the craftsmen to model the gardens after those in the south, with small bridges crossing flowing water and lakeside pavilions meticulously designed to evoke Jiangnan’s delicate beauty.

Yet Shen Jue seldom returned here. The palace kept him busy, leaving him little time to rest, so he seldom visited this residence more than a few times a year.

In the hazy moonlight, the empty courtyard resembled a large vat of cold water, leeching all the warmth from one's bones. Most of the garden was sealed off and overgrown with dense vegetation. There was no liveliness, no trace of human presence.

With the new emperor enthroned, palace affairs had largely stabilized, and the trivial matters remaining could be left to subordinates. Shen Jue had thus stolen a moment to return here, planning to rise early the next morning to pay respects to his ancestors. Wei De was dead, and he wanted to inform Aunt Lan so she could rest in peace.

But as Shen Jue passed the study on his way to the bedchamber, he suddenly stopped. The study door in the shadowy walkway was unlocked. Shen Wenxing noticed this and frowned.

"The servants are too careless! They've grown lax in your absence, Godfather!"

Shen Jue raised a hand to silence him. Shen Wenxing immediately shut his mouth and shrank back. Walking forward, Shen Jue slowly pushed the door open. The darkness inside quickly swallowed his figure. Sensing something amiss, Shen Wenxing hurried off to summon help.

Inside, Xiahou Lian crouched by a chest holding a fire starter in one hand as he rummaged with the other. There were too many chests to search—he never realized he had so many clothes, and all of coarse black hemp. They blended into a sea of darkness within the chest—and Hengbo was nowhere to be found. Frustrated, he tore at his hair. Where could Shen Jue have stashed it if not here?

Suddenly, a shadow loomed overhead like a dark cloud, plunging Xiahou Lian's surroundings into deeper gloom. Xiahou Lian shivered and slowly turned his head to see Shen Jue looking down at him, his expression unreadable. The fire starter's glow illuminated the lower half of Shen Jue's face, gilding it like the face of a golden statue. The upper half remained shrouded in darkness, shadow veiling Shen Jue's eye sockets, nose, and

lips. His seemingly empty, fixed gaze sent an inexplicable chill down Xiahou Lian's spine.

Xiahou Lian swiftly blew out the fire starter, plunging the room into absolute darkness. He sprang up to flee when the sharp whistle of a blade slicing through air came from behind him. Drawing his own saber, Xiahou Lian turned to block—only for his brand-new goose-quill saber to snap in two with a crack and clatter to the floor.

Xiahou Lian hesitated for a moment. The black blade pursued him like a shadow, instantly closing the distance. There wasn't even enough light in the room for Xiahou Lian to see his own hand; he relied solely on hearing and instinct to evade Shen Jue's strikes. The darkness was to Xiahou Lian's advantage—he was an assassin, so darkness was his domain. Years of navigating bloodshed had honed his sensitivity to danger, the very air around him serving as his most acute sensor. Whichever direction the blade came from, he could react instantly.

Shen Jue sensed this and chose not to prolong the fight. He withdrew instead, and both men stood waiting in the dark. Finally, Xiahou Lian rolled sideways to hide among the rows of display shelves. Then a light flickered at Shen Jue's side, and a candle's faint glow illuminated half the room. Shen Jue's gaze was icy and standoffish as he held the dim flame. Xiahou Lian realized his mistake at once; he had misjudged his position in the dark and rolled the wrong way. Now Shen Jue was guarding the door—Xiahou Lian would have to defeat him to escape.

"Who are you?" Shen Jue asked.

Xiahou Lian remained silent. His face was covered—Shen Jue wouldn't recognize him.

"A holdout from Wei De's faction?" Shen Jue guessed. He set down the candle and strode forward, the golden threads of his pleated robe glinting faintly as his hem swayed with each step.

Xiahou Lian grabbed a blade from the shelf—a wakizashi from his collection named Oni no Naku. According to legend, it was sharp enough to cut metal and stone, and it wailed mournfully whenever it killed as if the soul it had slain were screaming. Xiahou Lian had used it a few times, and while the wailing was a myth, the sharpness was real.

“A thief disguised as a servant?” Shen Jue guessed again, drawing his blade once more. The pure black steel slid soundlessly from its sheath, unassuming, yet as chilling as a ghost.

It was Jingtie.

He’s even using Jingtie? Xiahou Lian froze for a moment. *Why? If he hates me so much, why keep wielding Jingtie?*

“Neither?” Shen Jue’s gaze sharpened, frosty. “Then who the hell are you?”

The blade descended like a mountain landslide as Shen Jue gripped the hilt with both hands and slashed downward with terrifying force. The black saber split the candlelight, sweeping toward Xiahou Lian with a frigid ominousness. Xiahou Lian swiftly drew his own blade; its steel gleamed like flowing water as it left the sheath, its light darting like a beast. Xiahou Lian bent low and countered Shen Jue with a diagonal slash, blocking his fatal strike. The impact sent both men reeling backward.

Xiahou Lian pivoted and shifted his stance, holding the wakizashi in a reverse grip as he stepped forward. The arc of his blade was sinuous and fluid, demonstrating a bloody elegance. The edge closed in fast—but Shen Jue dodged, arching backward. The blade passed a mere inch above the bridge of his nose. Their exchange—clash, then separation—had lasted only a single breath. In that fleeting moment, Xiahou Lian felt a cool touch on his face. Shen Jue’s hand had slipped past the wakizashi and snatched away his veil. But it didn’t matter—he had disguised himself, and thanks to that double precaution, he ran no risk of exposure.

“Japanese swordsmanship,” Shen Jue remarked, tossing aside the veil. “Are you a Japanese pirate?” He spoke a phrase in Japanese, but Xiahou Lian didn’t understand a single word.

“So that’s a no, then,” Shen Jue murmured, studying him before smiling coldly. “You’re Shang-erlang.”

Xiahou Lian was stunned. *How the hell did he know?!*

“I’m right,” Shen Jue said, reading his expression with certainty.

Xiahou Lian forced a smile. “Be merciful, Chief. Please return Hengbo to me.”

“‘Return’?” Shen Jue’s smile turned icy. “What do you mean, ‘return’? Hengbo is mine. I gave you a chance to live, Shang-erlang. If you don’t want it, fine!”

Xiahou Lian turned and bolted. Shen Jue pursued him. A sharp whistle sounded behind Xiahou Lian, and he ducked as a black bolt whizzed overhead and embedded itself in the door before him. By the time Xiahou Lian burst back into the study, Shen Jue had caught up. Their blades clashed again, and both men unleashed a flurry of rapid slashes. Steel flashed wildly in the cramped room, moonlight glinting off Xiahou Lian’s wakizashi and scattering reflections across the walls. Bookshelves and furniture were inevitably caught in the crossfire, and splintering wood flew everywhere. The men’s attacks were like storm winds, fierce and relentless. The clang of steel against steel sounded like frantic strumming on a pipa or pearls clattering over a jade plate.

In the instant their blades met, sparks flew, and Shen Jue suddenly smiled. It was a bloodthirsty smile riddled to the bone with murderous intent. Xiahou Lian’s heart went cold.

“I’ve figured out your blade,” Shen Jue whispered.

After that, the strikes from his own blade transformed.

Jingtie became a phantom, the black saber’s shadow seeming to multiply a thousandfold. Hidden in the darkness, Xiahou Lian could barely follow its movements. There was no glint of steel, no sound of the blade slicing the air. Jingtie lurked at the end of Shen Jue’s sleeve, following his sudden advance and sweeping toward Xiahou Lian’s arm as they met. Blood welled in its wake, dripping down Xiahou Lian’s wrist and between his fingers.

Shen Jue was unbelievably strong—Xiahou Lian couldn’t comprehend it. He had taught Shen Jue swordsmanship, yet what he faced now bore no resemblance to the Garden’s techniques. Still, it was familiar; he’d seen this style somewhere before.

“Stop, Shen Jue,” Xiahou Lian said. “I don’t want to fight you.”

“Oh?” Shen Jue smiled leisurely, the curve of his lips laced with menace. “Well, I never planned to let you leave alive.”

Must it be your life or my own? Was this confrontation unavoidable even now that Xiahou Lian had left the jianghu to live as a mere commoner? “I don’t want to kill you, Shen Jue,” Xiahou Lian said softly, his hoarse voice heavy with sorrow. “I just want Hengbo back.”

He adjusted his breathing and withdrew his sword, body bent low. The blade glinted fiercely against his left hand as he pulled it back to one side of his chest. His entire demeanor shifted—calm as still water, he suppressed the blade’s light beneath his palm, concealing its edge in dullness.

After three breaths, Xiahou Lian stepped forward. His black sleeve billowed like a diving falcon plunging into darkness. The blade in his hand revealed itself, its glare bursting from the sleeve like a beast baring its fangs as he executed the wakizashi technique Tiger’s Lunge.

Shen Jue sidestepped. The wakizashi grazed Jingtie’s edge before stabbing into the shadows with a fleeting spray of golden sparks. The first thrust had missed; Xiahou Lian retracted the blade immediately. Then, in the blink of an eye, he made a second thrust!

Shen Jue’s eyes flickered with surprise, and Jingtie failed to block this strike—the wakizashi’s tip pierced his chest on the left. Shen Jue grunted. Instead of pushing deeper, Xiahou Lian withdrew the blade, flicking it upward. The wakizashi’s length struck Shen Jue’s right hand and sent Jingtie flying across the room.

Now that Shen Jue was weaponless, surely the fight would end!

“Stop at—” began Xiahou Lian.

Before he could finish, Shen Jue drew a handheld crossbow from beneath his cloak. He pulled the trigger with a snap, firing three bolts at once. Xiahou Lian had no time to dodge; the bolts buried themselves in his arm, provoking a flare of pain, and the wakizashi clattered to the floor. In the next instant, Shen Jue’s fist connected with Xiahou Lian’s jaw, sending the intruder crashing into the bookshelf. He collapsed to the ground, and scrolls and tomes rained down on his head.

Fucking hell!

One of Xiahou Lian’s teeth had been knocked loose. He spat out a mouthful of blood and pushed himself up. The blood splattered onto an

open dossier beneath him—an official document covered in meticulous notes written in a tiny script, the paper yellowed with age. Blood-smeared words became visible in the moonlight:

Hangzhou Prefecture, Eastern Depot Agent Xiao Zhong acted without orders, attempting to kill Xiahou Lian, and was transferred to Jiaozhi, never to return. Xiahou Lian is not to be harmed in the slightest. Other violators will receive the same punishment.

What did it mean? For a moment, Xiahou Lian was numb. Then it hit him. *"Not to be harmed in the slightest."* Shen Jue hadn't been hunting him to kill him—he'd been *searching* for him. His lips trembled as he clutched the dossier and staggered to his feet. He realized at last that Shen Jue's unpredictable, phantom-like swordplay was identical to that of the assassin who'd saved him in Liuzhou—a style so bizarre, he'd seen it only once before. No wonder his clothes and weapons were here. No wonder Shen Jue still used Jingtie!

That moron Shen Jue! Why is he always so pig-headed?!

Xiahou Lian opened his mouth to call out, "Shaoye!" But as the syllable "Shao" reached the tip of his tongue, numbness spread through his mouth—then his entire body.

"I forgot to mention," Shen Jue said coolly, "that those arrows are poisoned."

Xiahou Lian fought to steady himself, his lips parting to speak. Shen Jue stood before him bathed in moonlight, his gaze as cold as a fistful of snow, not a flicker of emotion to be seen. Hurried footsteps were approaching, and torchlight flooded the courtyard, painting one side of Shen Jue's cold, pale face in soft reds that lent it a touch of warmth. Yet his eyes remained frozen through, chilling Xiahou Lian to the bone.

Without a backward glance, Shen Jue turned and stalked away, his black silhouette growing more distant with each step. Numbness finally consumed Xiahou Lian's limbs, and he collapsed to his knees, then slumped forward, body heavy against the ground. Yet still he strained, his fingers reaching stiffly toward Shen Jue.

"Shao…"

Joy and sorrow tangled in his chest. Shen Jue had never forgotten him; they had never been enemies. They were still friends as they'd always been. That hardheaded fool had searched for Xiahou Lian ceaselessly for a decade. Xiahou Lian felt like a wandering ghost that had drifted endlessly before finally stumbling back onto the right path and finding its way home through the dark. How could he have been so stupid? He knew how Shen Jue was, knew his habit of squirming away from his feelings, of saying one thing and meaning another. Yet Xiahou Lian had fallen for his nonsense!

Memories surged through him like a tide—recollections of scaling walls together, studying side by side, sparring with blades. *Idiot,* he cursed himself. *Get up and tell him! Tell him you're Xiahou Lian!* But he couldn't rise. He was dying—and at the hands of Shen Jue, his best friend.

His vision blurred, and blackness pressed down. Too late. It was too late. Shen Jue's figure shrank, his flowing cloud-patterned cloak merging with the night. Xiahou Lian's fingers went slack, and at last, the darkness swallowed him whole.

Chapter 65:
A Toast in Celebration

IN THE EASTERN DEPOT'S headquarters, Shen Jue sat at the head of the hall, listening to his subordinates' reports. Above him hung a massive golden plaque inscribed *Eternal Glory*, while behind him loomed a relief of coiled dragons, their fangs bared. Two ebony candelabras flanked Shen Jue, and rows of polished nanmu chairs lined the hall, each draped with a blue-and-gold embroidered cover. Shen Wenxing stood nearby, gently fanning Shen Jue with a palm-leaf fan. Situ Jin waited at his side.

Shen Jue looked weary and drained. He had been working nonstop for over a fortnight, rising early and retiring late, and last night's incident with Shang-erlang robbed him of sleep—even a man made of iron would have been exhausted. Outside, the sun blazed fiercely, its harsh light streaming into the hall. Shen Jue squinted at the dust motes dancing in the beams; they resembled tiny, flitting green midges.

"Chief?" one of his commanders called softly.

Shen Jue snapped back to attention. "Mm-hmm. Speak."

"One of Wei De's remaining followers, Xu Shou, left the capital yesterday. Per your orders, we have men tailing him discreetly. The moment he contacts other members of Wei's faction, we'll arrest them all. Xu Shou is heading west, likely planning to sail from Tianjin. We've already stationed men there."

Shen Jue rubbed his temples, eyes closed. "Handle the matter as you see fit—no need to report back. Wei De's banner has fallen. These small fry are just scurrying around, fleeing overseas or beyond the passes. Track them down along the expected routes; you're sure to find them." He exhaled sharply. "Right now, the real problem isn't his holdouts—it's the mess you shortsighted fools have created. You've all lost your heads just because I've gained power! First, my residence gets burgled, and now there are shrines being erected in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Huguang. Building me temples when I'm not even dead yet—am I supposed to thank you for your

kindness? The Qingliu[3] faction pedants jumped on this as a bone to pick; their slander alone is enough to drown someone. If I drown, do you really think you'll emerge unscathed?!"

"We would not dare!" The battalion commander broke into a cold sweat. "Please calm your anger, Chief—the men only meant to honor you and pray for your longevity! Just days ago, Commander Wei of Jizhou even sent you a white deer. It was all done with good intentions—they never thought they were causing you trouble, the blind fools! I'll order all the shrines torn down at once!"

Shen Jue's brow furrowed. "In court, caution is paramount. A white deer is an auspicious omen—it should've been presented to His Majesty. How could they send it to me? Dispose of it."

The commander bowed repeatedly in agreement.

Another officer hurried in, bending at the waist. "Chief, we searched your residence. Nothing was stolen except for a dossier we recovered from Shang-erlang's person. He must've taken it from your study."

"A dossier? So he's one of Wei De's men?"

"That isn't clear. He woke once and tried to escape, injuring several guards in the process. He nearly succeeded. I had to…persuade him to quiet down." The officer hesitated. "How should we proceed? Continue interrogating him, or…?"

Shen Jue tapped the table, deliberating. The man had been Xiahou Lian's friend, but he'd crossed the line repeatedly—despicable. Worse, he'd broken into the Shen residence and stolen documents, his goal unknown. These were turbulent times. Shen Jue had just risen to power, and his footing was still unsteady. The Qingliu faction's members were watching like tigers, and the empress dowager was not an easy woman to manage. All sides wanted him to misstep—one slip, and they'd pounce. Shen Jue's creed had always been that it was better to kill ten thousand than spare one threat, and Shang-erlang was a liability.

Shen Jue lifted his gaze and said icily, "Keeping him isn't necessary. Execute him."

"Understood." The officer bowed and retreated.

Shen Jue picked up his teacup, using its lid to skim foam off the tea, then paused. “What about the investigation into Shang-erlang’s background I ordered last time? Any results?”

A subordinate clasped his hands. “We submitted the report a few days ago, Chief—you must’ve been too busy to review it. The man’s origins are murky: There’s no household register, no records, except that he served in the military in Taizhou a year and a half ago, then came to the capital half a year back. He works odd jobs at Yunxian Tower. Oh, and ‘Shang-erlang’ isn’t his real name; at Yunxian Tower, they call him Xiahou Lao-er, but in Taizhou, he went by Shang-erniu.[4] We have no idea which is his actual name.”

The porcelain cup shattered against the floor, splashing tea across Shen Jue’s robes. Everyone started, and Shen Wenxing yelped, moving hastily to wipe the stains from Shen Jue’s knees.

Shen Jue shoved him away, eyes blazing. “Say that name again. What did they call him?” His face was deathly pale.

“Xiahou—” the bewildered subordinate stammered.

Before he could finish, Shen Jue shot to his feet. “Quick! Call that officer back now!”

No one questioned the order. They scrambled into action. Shen Jue rushed out, his face pallid. As if sunlight had pierced the clouds, everything was suddenly plainly visible. “Shang” was a homophone for “ascend”—the opposite of “Xia,” “descend.” Erlang, Lao-er, Erniu—“Er” was “two,” and Xiahou Lian was a second son. That idiot was Xiahou Lian! That was why he’d been able to disguise himself, and why he knew about Jingtie. That was why his eyes seemed so familiar. And Shen Jue himself had just ordered his execution!

Shen Jue’s heart felt like it was about to burst; his eyes reddened instantly. He began to run, the wind roaring in his ears. A trail of men chased desperately after him, shouting “Chief!” but he heard none of them. He tore past Jingzhong Hall and through the side pavilion; the walkways twisted, vermilion railings and pillars overlapping endlessly. For the first time, he hated the Eastern Depot’s labyrinthine vastness.

His hair came undone; he didn’t care. He missed a step while descending the stairs and tumbled down. He still didn’t care. He scrambled to his feet, his prayer beads and seals clattering to the ground. There was no time to retrieve them. His robes were filthy, his sleeves stained, and he had no time to care. He ran like a madman toward the prison. The composed Shen Jue, the calculating Shen Jue, the strategic Shen Jue—all vanished without a trace. He was Xie Jinglan now, rushing to find the book-boy he’d spent ten long years waiting for, searching for: Xiahou Lian.

Shen Wenxing and the others gasped for breath, struggling to keep up. Seeing Shen Jue fall down the steps stunned them—but before they could react, he was up and running again. Shen Wenxing scooped up the items that had scattered, shouting after Shen Jue.

Situ Jin frowned. “Don’t pursue him. Fetch a physician and prepare a carriage. The Chief will likely want to take Xiahou-shaoye back to his residence.”

Shen Wenxing stared at him in shock. “Xiahou-shaoye?”

“Hurry!”

Understanding dawned on Shen Wenxing. He nodded rapidly and rushed off, clutching the beads and seals.

Shen Jue continued to run, but the officer he sought was nowhere to be found. His heart sank, but with much difficulty, he finally reached the prison. The nauseating stench of blood assaulted him, but he ignored it and walked inside, mouth set in a thin line. The officer stood with a group of agents at the door to a cell. They all bowed in greeting at Shen Jue’s arrival.

He was stopping them in time—the deed hadn’t been done. His heart calmed a little, and he turned to enter the cell. Situ Jin had also arrived, and he sent the others away. One guard hung his head low, his hand clutching something. Situ Jin grabbed the man, reached into his sleeve, and pulled out a string of bright red prayer beads. With a cold expression, Situ Jin handed the man over to the guards, then turned to enter the cell.

Shen Jue walked toward the cell on stiff legs. A figure lay face down on the ground inside, his hair disheveled. His once finely jointed hands were already unrecognizable, swollen like steamed buns and covered in congealing red and black blood. Shen Jue felt as though his heart were

being crushed in a vise. Panicked, he gathered the man off the ground, calling out in a broken voice, “Xiahou Lian!”

Xiahou Lian didn’t respond. His eyes were shut; his lips were dry and pale, cracked like parched earth. In just one night and morning, the Eastern Depot had reduced him to this state. Shen Jue’s heart ached as if torn apart. Afraid to touch Xiahou Lian’s ruined hands, he held him by the shoulders and called his name over and over.

“Please don’t panic, Chief,” said Situ Jin. “Young Shen-gonggong has already gone to fetch the imperial physician. For now, my lord, let’s carry him out.”

“Right, yes—let’s get him out of here.” Shen Jue’s scattered wits had only just returned. Even the most capable man would be left helpless if pierced at his weakest point—especially if his own hand had driven the blade into his heart. He had no one to hate, no one to blame, but himself.

Lifting Xiahou Lian in his arms, Shen Jue carried him to the side chamber to lay him on the carved bed. The waiting physician examined Xiahou Lian closely and assured Shen Jue that the injuries were merely superficial: No bones were broken, and Xiahou Lian would recover with time and care. As the physician spoke, he applied medicine to Xiahou Lian’s wounds, then bandaged them. Still uneasy, Shen Jue pressed the physician to confirm this several times, noting all the necessary tonics before finally allowing himself to relax.

Xiahou Lian lay asleep within the soft lilac bed curtains. Shen Jue had servants bring warm water; wringing out a cloth, he gently wiped the grime from Xiahou Lian’s face. Beneath Xiahou Lian’s white ramie undershirt, faint scars peeked through. Shen Jue unfastened the garment to reveal a body crisscrossed with wounds both shallow and deep; they streaked across Xiahou Lian’s honey-toned chest and abdomen. Xiahou Lian’s flesh looked as if it had been flayed a thousand times; there was hardly an untouched patch of skin. She Jue’s gaze traveled upward and settled on an old scar on Xiahou Lian’s right shoulder—it had been stitched long ago, and the skin along the seam was puckered and sunken like a deep ravine.

Shen Jue had stitched that wound himself. A name could be changed and a face altered—but not a body. It was him. Xiahou Lian. No wonder

he'd refused to undress during the flood; he was afraid his scars would betray him. Tears slipped silently down Shen Jue's cheeks. Turning, he spotted the prayer beads on the bedside table. He picked them up and wound them slowly around Xiahou Lian's limp wrist. The maroon beads gleamed like a string of red beans, each carrying Shen Jue's years of longing and prayer. The gods did exist—they had heard his pleas. But he had been too ruthless, too merciless. The heavens meant to punish him, fate to mock him: They returned Xiahou Lian whole only for Shen Jue to destroy him.

Drop by drop, his tears splashed onto the beads. Shen Jue bent forward, pressing his forehead to Xiahou Lian's arm, and shut his eyes tightly. The act was both plea and atonement.

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XIAHOU LIAN WOKE in the afternoon.

The pale satin bed curtains dimmed the light, but as he blinked, he made out the hazy shapes of furnishings beyond—chairs, tables, vases. The mattress beneath him was impossibly soft, as if he were lying on a cloud. A delicate fragrance sweetened the air; it seemed to be woven into the bedding. *Of course,* Xiahou Lian thought. The wealthy perfumed even their sheets.

His swollen hands throbbed dully; wrapped in thick bandages, they resembled steamed buns. Xiahou Lian sat up and lifted the bed curtains, realizing only then that his jacket had been changed. He was now dressed in a slightly weathered Hangzhou silk undershirt, feather-light and airy, almost weightless on his body. Someone else had been wearing it; their warmth and scent lingered, wafting to his nose in subtle waves.

This was also someone else's room. It held an elaborately carved alcove bed, a daybed depicting the Eight Immortals, and glossy nanmu wood armchairs with matching footrests. A two-foot-tall square cloisonné urn stood by the door. Xiahou Lian was still groggy from his deep sleep, his mind hazy. Whose room could this be? He rose from the bed and walked a

few steps, barefoot. A magnificent robe adorned with red pythons and gold embroidery hung on the wall. Then it dawned on Xiahou Lian: The robe was Shen Jue's.

Xiahou Lian's own black hemp garments hung neatly on a sandalwood clothes rack. He managed to dress, though his bandaged hands made it difficult, then slipped on his shoes and stepped outside. The sunlight stabbed his eyes. He squinted until the courtyard came into focus—gray brick paths, two tubs containing dried-up lotuses, and a pear tree beyond the wall.

It looked like Qiuwu Courtyard.

Memories fell like crow feathers, dusting his lashes. He could almost see two boys from years past—one buried in books, the other digging for crickets in flowerpots. Xiahou Lian slowly sank onto the steps, staring blankly at the yard until a woman stepped through the moon gate. She gasped when she spotted him.

He rose and bowed slightly. "Could you direct me to the chief, ma'am?"

"Look at you, still weak yet up and about!" She limped over and gripped his elbow. And since when do you call me 'ma'am'? You used to call me 'Jie'—am I so old now? It's me—Lianxiang! Don't tell me you've forgotten me, Xiao-Lian!"

Xiahou Lian gaped, his eyes wide. "Lianxiang-jie?!"

She laughed, her round face crinkling and her eyes crescent moons. She wore a pale-blue gauze dress, her hair swept into a swallow-tail bun and glossy with osmanthus oil. Her gait was uneven—the beating she'd suffered in the Xie household had irreparably damaged her legs. The years had plumped her cheeks, and her hairstyle—that of a married woman—confirmed that she'd wed. Shen Jue had actually found her! Joy spread through Xiahou Lian.

"Ah, you little rascal—all grown up, but still causing us so much worry!" Lianxiang tutted, cradling his bandaged hands. "Look at these! How long will they take to heal?"

In truth, this was a small injury for Xiahou Lian. The torture had been a little painful, but none of his muscles or bones were damaged. Back when

he’d fought his way through mountains of corpses and rivers of blood, he’d taken more than one trip to the king of hell’s doorstep and back—this kind of injury was nothing to him. He assured Lianxiang that he was fine.

“Are you hungry?” Lianxiang asked. “I’ll fetch you some food from the kitchen.”

Xiahou Lian shook his head; there was no time to eat. He had questions for Shen Jue—and an apology to make. “Lianxiang-jie, where’s Shaoye? I need to see him.”

“You’re really not hungry?” she pressed, ignoring his question at first. Then she sighed. “Before you see him, there’s someplace you must go.”

Baffled, Xiahou Lian followed her.

As they walked, Lianxiang chattered on about how she met Shen Jue and came to live in the Shen residence. She was a wife and mother now; that said, she’d only married at twenty, since her damaged legs made finding a husband difficult. After that, she’d moved to the capital to earn a living. One day, selling flatbreads, she happened to see Shen Jue ride by. Hesitant to believe that it was him, she’d deliberately called her son “Xie Jinglan.” When Shen Jue turned his head, she knew he was truly her long-lost young master.

Shen Jue took in her entire family: Her husband worked in the kitchens while Lianxiang managed the household. When Shen Jue orchestrated his own fall from power, she and her family hid with Situ Jin’s family, returning only after Wei De’s defeat a few days previously. Her husband had remained essentially clueless, simply believing that Lianxiang’s good fortune had rubbed off on them all.

Lianxiang smiled as she led Xiahou Lian past the main gate. “Shaoye told me a little about you, though I don’t know much,” she said, guiding him through a side gate, her skirt held in her hands. “But I don’t need details. I just want you both to be safe.” She pointed forward, and Xiahou Lian raised his gaze to a dark wooden plaque bearing two large characters: *Ancestral Hall*. Couplets written on paper strips flanked the plaque, and the courtyard beyond stretched deep, its trees casting dancing shadows. This was odd for an ancestral hall; most such plaques included a family surname

—for example, “Xie Clan Ancestral Hall” or “Li Clan Ancestral Hall”—but this one displayed only those two stark characters.

A sandalwood stand occupied the very center of the ancestral hall; Hengbo lay atop it, and the altar table was behind Hengbo. There were only two spirit tablets on the table, one to the left and one to the right; they were serene and still as if they’d been waiting for eons. Xiahou Lian entered slowly, feeling as if a strange pull drew him forward like an invisible thread tugging him into the hall.

“Go take a look, Xiao-Lian,” said Lianxiang.

Xiahou Lian glanced at her but said nothing, his lips trembling slightly. He stepped across the threshold and walked slowly forward. The farther he progressed, the clearer the characters on the left spirit tablet became. Behind the tablet stood a small, unassuming blue-and-white porcelain jar resembling a wine vessel. It was an urn.

As he walked toward it, tears began to stream down Xiahou Lian’s face. He turned back to look at Lianxiang, who remained at the threshold, waving her handkerchief at him. “Go on in,” she urged him again. “She’s waited for you long enough.”

He turned away again, advancing step by step—treading over the moss creeping up the stone stairs and passing through the dappled shadows of dark-green leaves. Patches of light flickered across his face, shifting and swaying. He felt as though he’d traversed years before finally entering this silent ancestral hall.

Hengbo lay quietly upon its sword rack, its black sharkskin scabbard sheathing every trace of its once-fierce brilliance; it was now plain and unremarkable. The red sandalwood spirit tablet bore a woman’s name in regular, meticulous script. Years ago, her name rolled off countless tongues amid storms of bloodshed—a legendary household name known across the realm.

The weight of years of gratitude, grudges, grief, and longing surged within Xiahou Lian like a tide, dissolving into tears that spilled uncontrollably. He knelt and buried his face in his arms, weeping as though his heart would break.

“Won’t you go in and see him?” Lianxiang asked the man leaning against the wall behind her.

Shen Jue shifted slightly, gazing across the courtyard at Xiahou Lian’s kneeling figure within the hall. All Shen Jue could see was his black-clad back as Xiahou Lian trembled like a withered leaf in a frost-laden wind, desolate and alone.

Shen Jue shook his head. He had yearned for this day for many years, dreaming of it awake and asleep. Yet now that it was here, he was afraid—of what, even he didn’t know. He had trodden a knife’s edge for so long that fear had become foreign to him, but now his heart hung suspended, unable to settle.

Xiahou Lian remained in the ancestral hall for a long time. As the sun dipped westward, its golden-orange light spilled inside to paint tiger-stripe patterns across the floor. When Xiahou Lian finally emerged, he asked Lianxiang where Shen Jue was. She pointed toward where the horizon burned crimson, where deep verandas wound through fallen red maple leaves that crackled underfoot. There, at the end of the walkway, a lone figure dressed in white sat with his back to the world.

Shen Jue wasn’t wearing a pleated garment today. His ink-black hair cascaded loose down his back, and his plain jacket bore no gold embroidery or menacingly coiled pythons. When Shen Jue was stripped of his habitual frosty detachment and daunting nobility, all that remained was a tall, slender figure sitting alone in the courtyard, listening to autumn’s voice fill the garden. Xiahou Lian walked over and sat down beside him.

Once, we shared wine among peaches and plums, enjoying the spring breeze. Now, ten years since, it’s lonely nights in the desolate wilds, listening to the autumn rain.[5]

They asked no questions. They spoke no words. Shoulder to shoulder they sat as the wind howled overhead and maple leaves fluttered down around them—each leaf’s edges gilded with the sunset’s radiance as though aflame. The world seemed to shrink down to this one tiny courtyard where light and shadow danced upon the ground, where untrimmed potted plants and rustling trees murmured in fragmented whispers, the sounds surging like a rising tide.

Gradually, the wind stilled. All grew quiet. Leaves came to rest at their feet. A clumsy ant crawled up a leaf, then back down.

Xiahou Lian finally broke the silence, his voice soft. “Shaoye…back then, you said you’d let me be your gatekeeper, guarding your home for you. Does your offer still stand?”

Did it still stand?

The wind picked up again. Shen Jue turned to look at Xiahou Lian. Sunlight fractured in the latter’s eyes, gold flecks swimming in black. His youthful arrogance and assassin’s ferocity had long since melted into unutterable world-weariness, but the warmth of his smile was unchanged—it had never increased nor diminished. For years, countless unspoken longings had lain dormant in Shen Jue’s heart like somber cocoons. Now at last they burst forth as butterflies, their kaleidoscopic wings interweaving into a brilliance that rivaled clouds at sunset. He smiled, tears glistening in his eyes.

“Yes, it still stands.”

It always had.

Chapter 66:
A Loyalty Splendid as Brocade

AFTER THEIR MEAL, Shen Jue took Xiahou Lian to Jinggong Lane. Xiahou Lian lifted the curtain to look outside at the bustling streets as the carriage rumbled past Fuxiang Temple. Men sauntered past waving large palm-leaf fans, their arms swinging, and vendors shouted over one another from the rows of incense and candle stalls lining the roadside. In the open temple square, tattooed, bare-chested street performers stacked themselves head-to-foot in an acrobatic tower reaching precariously high. As the carriage turned into the alley behind the temple, all the clamor was suddenly left behind the walls, a distant hum of voices. It felt like they'd carved a secluded paradise out of the noisy world—yet just one step away, they could plunge right back into the clamor.

"Your predecessor had a good eye for location," Shen Jue said, lifting the carriage curtain to step out. "This spot is lively but convenient; there are food and drink stalls right outside the alley, a fine noodle shop across the street, and a grain-and-oil vendor to the left. The house has three courtyards, and even the outermost one stays quiet. The only downside is the lack of nearby tailor shops, but that won't matter. You can just come to my residence for clothes and shoes. Homemade is always better than outsourcing, anyway."

As Shen Jue spoke, Xiahou Lian set down a footstool and reached out a hand to help him down. Shen Jue paused briefly before placing his hand in Xiahou Lian's. The warmth of his palm seeped through Shen Jue and spread all the way to his heart.

"My mother loved a good crowd," Xiahou Lian said, walking over to stroke the stone lion at the gate. "When she had nothing to do, she just watched other folks do their tricks or took in martial arts plays on stage. She was way better than the performers—their fancy moves were nothing to her—but she loved the noise and excitement of it all."

He looked up at the modest house standing before him. Dense tangles of ivy crawled over its gray-tiled roof and whitewashed walls, and two

stone lions flanked a black-lacquered gate to the right. It was an ordinary home, no different from thousands of others in the capital—a small, unassuming place, just enough to be comfortable, where one could shut the door and live a simple life.

Shen Jue pushed the gate open and led Xiahou Lian inside. A lotus-patterned spirit screen greeted them at the entrance, and beyond the inner gate lay the main hall.

The place was completely furnished. There were two rows of red sandalwood official's armchairs with footrests, and in front of those, an ironwood log table bearing a landscape stone screen. Well-traveled as Xiahou Lian was, he immediately recognized the fine Wu-style woodwork. The chamber contained no intricate carvings, no gilded inlays—just clean, understated elegance. He knew at once that this was Shen Jue's doing—his mother would've filled the place with spears and halberds, leaving a spiked mace in the main hall to ward off evil.

"Thank you, Shaoye," Xiahou Lian said with a faint smile.

Sitting in one of the armchairs, Shen Jue coughed lightly. "What for? It's not like I bought you the house."

"But you furnished it," Xiahou Lian pointed out.

"A trivial effort," Shen Jue countered, feigning nonchalance. "I just wrote a few lists, and my men took care of the rest—it was no trouble at all." He didn't mention how meticulously he'd overseen every detail, personally approving each piece before it was placed. The ironwood log table, for instance—its craftsmanship was exceptional, its cost exorbitant. The original owner had refused to sell until his fear of Shen Jue's authority compelled him to do so.

Xiahou Lian wandered into the courtyard, circling the grapevine trellis, then crossed his arms. "When did you and my mother get so close, Shaoye? I had no idea."

Shen Jue didn't answer. Instead, he led Xiahou Lian to a side room—he knew this house far better than Xiahou Lian did, and perhaps even better than his own residence. From a cabinet of curiosities, he retrieved a sealed sandalwood box. Unlocking it, he revealed a deed, a prescription, and a single pill.

The deed was likely for the house, but the pill puzzled Xiahou Lian. He picked it up. “What’s this?”

“It’s called Hope’s Return,” Shen Jue said slowly. “It’s the antidote for Seven Fifteen.”

Xiahou Lian stiffened, his eyes snapping up to Shen Jue’s face.

Shen Jue’s expression remained calm. “Ten years ago, your mother took you from the palace,” he continued. “Before she left, she made a ten-year pact with me: She revealed the locations of Qiye Garden sleeper agents and tasked me with developing an antidote for you.”

“And she told you about the agents so that you could…?”

“Turn them into test subjects.”

Xiahou Lian’s brow furrowed. “That’s why you were hunting down Garden assassins and moles—to make them test subjects?”

Seeing his frown, Shen Jue soured. A sharp laugh escaped him. “What? You think me cruel for butchering your comrades?”

Xiahou Lian remained silent, examining the prescription.

After a long pause, Shen Jue—fearing he’d truly upset Xiahou Lian—muttered, “Did your Garden brethren ever care for you? They abandoned you in the palace—and a traitor among them killed your mother.”

Xiahou Lian noticed Shen Jue’s anger and chuckled. “I don’t blame you. Why would I?” He sidled up to Shen Jue and likewise leaned against the wall, so they stood shoulder-to-shoulder. “I should thank you instead. You’ve done so much for me in silence—and like an idiot, I mistook your kindness for malice. If anyone bears guilt, it’s me. ‘Seven Fifteen’ was in Shixin’s hands–I took his life, and with it, the lives of everyone in Qiye Garden.”

“Was the abbot the traitor who killed your mother?” asked Shen Jue.

Xiahou Lian nodded.

Shen Jue was silent. He had spies within the Garden; their secrets were his. That Shixin was Xiahou Lian’s birth father was an open secret there, and Shen Jue had guessed that Xiahou Lian’s solo assassination of Shixin meant the man was also the Garuda’s killer. But speculating was one

thing—having Xiahou Lian confirm it was another. A dull ache spread through his body, sinking deep into his bones. When he finally spoke, his voice was hoarse. “All these years… What have you been through?”

“It’s a hell of a long story—more dull than a doddering grandma’s rambling. You really want to hear it?” Xiahou Lian grinned.

“Yes.” Shen Jue lifted his dark lashes, gaze fixed on Xiahou Lian. “If it’s about you, I want to hear everything.”

Xiahou Lian sighed in mock exasperation, pulling Shen Jue into an armchair, then settling in to talk. His low, steady voice filled the stifling autumn afternoon. Sunlight slid across their brows and shoulders, then faded away, as ten years of Xiahou Lian’s life unfolded in his words—fragments of memory, fleeting and luminous, pieced together one by one. Night fell. The moon rose, washing the room in pale light.

Shen Jue listened in silence. The blood-soaked escapes and deaths in Xiahou Lian’s tale lost their sharp edges, like crimson muted through a veil—less visceral but no less real. Still, Shen Jue knew those brutal years had scarred Xiahou Lian, wounds that never quite healed piling up over time.

“That’s it,” Xiahou Lian said at last. He got up and rummaged for a candle, then lit it.

Shen Jue’s eyes stayed closed. His fingers tapped the table—*tuk, tuk*—betraying the storm beneath his calm exterior.

“What’s on your mind?” Xiahou Lian asked.

“How stupid you are.” Shen Jue’s laugh was icy. “Shixin, Duan Jiu, even that shifu of yours—every last one scheming behind your back, using you as their blade. And you happily played the fool.”

Xiahou Lian was quiet for a moment. “Don’t talk about my shifu like that.”

“You never noticed?”

Xiahou Lian shrugged. “Of course I did—I just didn’t care. The point was to kill Shixin and burn Qiye Garden to the ground. Why overthink it? So what if my shifu used me?” He looked down, smiling faintly. “He never forced me. I chose this path myself.”

That was just how he was. The twists and turns of others' schemes weren't his concern. He walked his own road: The Garden had to fall; Shixin had to die. The rest could play their games, but he wouldn't indulge them. Xiahou blood ran fierce in his veins, furnishing him with the same reckless fury that had driven his mother. Should gods or ghosts have barred his way, he'd have cut them down all the same.

Then Shen Jue asked, "And if you chose wrong?"

Xiahou Lian stiffened—the words were like a pail of ice water dumped over his head. "What are you saying?"

"There's no limit to the tales a person can spin. Someone could swear they saw a ghost at high noon. If I told you I killed Wei De merely to save the throne and serve the realm, would you believe me?" Shen Jue's sidelong glance was razor-sharp. "Words can lie, but actions don't."

The bitterness in his voice left Xiahou Lian speechless; Xie Jinglan had once vowed to fight for justice too. Luckily, Shen Jue's question was rhetorical. Xiahou Lian exhaled. "You're saying that someone lied to me," he responded, voice grave.

"Not 'someone'—*everyone*."

Xiahou Lian gaped at him in silence.

"What I'm saying is, you have to look at what they actually did—not just swallow whatever sweet talk they feed you, idiot!" Shen Jue rapped his knuckles on Xiahou Lian's forehead. "Tell me: Who led you into the archives?"

Xiahou Lian hesitated. "Chiyan."

"And whom did Chiyan serve?"

Xiahou Lian frowned. "Shixin. But I was the one who asked him—"

"Even if you hadn't, he'd have found a way to take you there." Shen Jue's voice was slow, deliberate. "You didn't walk into those archives on your own—Shixin let you in. Everything you saw there, everything you heard was only what he wanted you to see and hear. You thought you were choosing your own path? Wrong, Xiahou Lian. You were following the path Shixin laid out for you."

“But my goal was to kill him! He *let* me kill him? Was he out of his damn mind?”

Shen Jue smirked. He couldn’t say whether Shixin had been insane, but Qiye Garden was a nest of scheming bastards; Xiahou Lian was the only wholly decent one among them. Despite her bloodthirst, Xiahou Pei had genuinely cared for her son, so she just barely counted as half-decent. Shen Jue couldn’t explain this aloud, though, so instead he lowered his gaze and murmured, “The details are irrelevant. To summarize, Shixin led you into those archives to feed you three pieces of information: One, that he killed your mother. Two, that you were intended to serve as the Garden’s next abbot. Three, that you were to assassinate someone in the north.”

“You’re saying that all three of those things were lies?”

“Not entirely.” Shen Jue stood and leaned against the wall, rubbing his chin. “Remember what happened after you left the archives? Qiu Ye urged you to destroy the Garden. You didn’t become the next abbot—you vanished—and your brother went to the north in your place. Of those three bits of information, only one proved true: that Shixin was responsible for your mother’s death.”

“He killed her, so he had to know that I’d come for revenge. That loops back to your theory that he *wanted* me to kill him.”

Shen Jue’s sidelong glance was razor-sharp. “That means he had another goal. After you killed him, what happened?”

Xiahou Lian was silent for a long time, then replied, “I left the Garden. I lived.” He’d always wondered how he’d survived—perhaps it was thanks to the tea Shixin had made him drink before their duel. He didn’t like to dwell on it, though. In his heart, Shixin had to be a monster, unfeeling and unforgivable. Only then could Xiahou Lian justify taking his life. “You said that *everyone* lied to me. Who else?” Xiahou Lian asked, his voice low.

“Your shifu.” Shen Jue tapped the table. “He was the linchpin. Don’t you see, Xiahou Lian? Every step you took was at his direction: killing Shixin, traveling to Qixia Mountain. After all, who pointed you there?” He dipped his finger in tea and used the liquid to scrawl three names on the table: *Shixin*, *Qiu Ye*, and *Duan Jiu*. Circling the first two, he concluded, “These two were in cahoots.”

Xiahou Lian stared at the fading names. The heat dried the tea swiftly—*Qiu Ye* was already gone, *Shixin* just a smudge. His memories tangled like knotted thread: Shixin's gaunt face, Qiu Ye's dying words, the leaves of Qiye Garden's mountain falling like rain while autumn's voice howled through the wilderness. *Leave the Garden. Remake your face.*

"Shixin and Shifu…wanted me gone." Xiahou Lian's voice was hoarse. "Kill Shixin, throw the Garden into chaos so that no one would chase me. Shifu sent me to Qixia Mountain, and I changed my face so that the Garden could never find me." The candlelight flickered, shadows dancing across Xiahou Lian's face. He laughed softly. "Shaoye, are you saying that bald old bastard actually gave a damn about me? He went to all this trouble—killing my mother, engineering this farce—just to give me a way out?"

"I don't know," Shen Jue said, pressing his fingers to his temples. "But leaving the Garden clearly came at a price."

Xiahou Lian said nothing.

"There's someone crucial here." Shen Jue rewrote *Duan Jiu*. He drew out the final stroke, the movement lingering like the cold slice of a blade. *Qiu Ye* and *Shixin* had vanished from the table, leaving only faint marks, so *Duan Jiu* alone remained in stark, bold strokes. "Searching for you all these years, I planted many spies in the Garden. The temple is too picky and only admits orphans, so I settled for placing spies in brothels and relay stations. Three months after you left, though, every last one of them disappeared. The last message I received was this: 'Duan Jiu has taken over as acting abbot. He governs with an iron fist. All fear him.'"

"There was a purge within the Garden?"

"Not only that, but all its secret hideouts disappeared without a trace. Then the Garden vanished from the face of the Earth as if it had simply been erased. I assigned men to scour nameless corpses everywhere, and I instructed forensic examiners to look for any evidence of Seven Fifteen in their systems. There were no such corpses—not a single one." He massaged his temples. "Shixin's play wasn't staged just for you; it was also for Duan Jiu. He's a truly frightening man. At the very least, a man even your abbot was wary of."

“So, from the sound of it, Qiye Garden’s assassins are still around? But Seven Fifteen flares up once a year, and Shixin is dead, so where would they get the antidote? Unless… Did Shixin give the prescription to Duan Jiu beforehand?” Xiahou Lian mused.

Shen Jue sat down on the daybed and glanced at the sky outside. It looked to be close to midnight already. He hadn’t slept well these past few days and struggled now to stay awake. Resting his elbows on his knees, he cradled his forehead in his palms and closed his eyes. “Xiahou Lian, do you know how Seven Fifteen is made?”

“No.” Noticing how dazed and exhausted Shen Jue looked, Xiahou Lian asked, “Are you tired? Maybe we should talk more tomorrow.”

“No. If we’re going to discuss this, let’s finish it now, so that you don’t end up confused about it.” Shen Jue forced himself to stay alert. “Seven Fifteen’s main ingredient is a flower called an azalea that grows in the Miao regions. It acts like a sleeping draught; consuming it makes people drowsy. In the past, traveling physicians used it to treat insomnia, but it can’t be taken long-term or in large doses—it’s highly addictive. Addicts must take it yearly or become paralyzed. The flower you found on Heimianfo was most likely an azalea.”

“Then what?” Xiahou Lian asked.

“To make Seven Fifteen, azalea flowers are first mashed into a paste, then mixed with water, boiled, and combined with other ingredients before being rolled into pills and dried. Then they’re ready. Twenty flowers yield five or six pills.”

“The Garden had over a thousand members,” Xiahou Lian murmured. “Even one pill per person would require thousands of flowers. I know that mountain like the back of my hand, and I’ve never seen that flower there. Yet Shixin only had one pot.” Xiahou Lian suddenly looked up. “He wasn’t making poison—he was making the *antidote*!”

“Essentially.” Shen Jue nodded. “But this whole thing is bizarre. Even your abbot didn’t have the antidote for Seven Fifteen. To give it to you, he had to secretly brew it himself. There’s only one explanation—”

“The true master of the Garden wasn’t the abbot,” Xiahou Lian finished. “Then where is the real master?”

In the dim candlelight, his eyes met Shen Jue's as they spoke in unison: "The north!"

Qiye Garden's previous generation was buried in the north not because of a failed assassination, but because they'd rebelled. The Garden was never under the abbot's control—even he was merely a puppet. Xiahou Lian felt lost in a thick fog. He was born and raised in the Garden, yet he'd never truly understood it; it was like a ghost city beyond the mortal world, where every assassin was a shadowy specter with a blurred face. Had Shixin exhausted all his schemes and efforts just to break his son free of Qiye Garden? Xiahou Lian couldn't believe it.

"These are just guesses. Don't dwell on it too much," Shen Jue murmured drowsily, reclining against the pillow. "There are still too many unanswered questions. Who exactly is Duan Jiu, and what are his intentions? He appeared to rebel, yet in the end he rebuilt the Garden. The previous generation's Eight Legions all went to the north, but your generation knew almost nothing about that—why not? We don't have enough information to dig deeper, so let it be for now. The matter of the Garden isn't settled—they'll be back sooner or later."

"Shaoye, I want to go to the north," Xiahou Lian said.

Shen Jue's eyes snapped open. "No!"

"Why not?"

Shen Jue stood and strode over, his expression severe. "If you dare try to go, I'll break your legs! Stop chasing the Garden's ghosts. The imperial court will deal with those rebel scum. What business is it of yours? The Garden's ragtag forces consist of twenty or thirty decent fighters at most. We can crush them in an instant, yet here you are, foolishly rushing to throw your life away!"

Xiahou Lian sighed. "It's not just about the Garden—it's about my brother. If Shixin developed the antidote, he might have given it to Chiyan too. My brother disappeared in the north. There's still a chance I could find him."

"Don't trouble yourself. How much ground can a man cover on foot? I'll have the Eastern Depot search on your behalf. Stay in the capital—and don't you dare go anywhere." He tilted his chin and added, "Actually, I

forgot to tell you something. Go check the deed for the residence. What's written on it?"

Xiahou Lian unfolded the yellowed paper and saw his own name: *Xiahou Lian*. He looked up at Shen Jue. "How is this possible? I'm a drifter—I don't have a household registration. How can my name be here?"

"You're not a drifter. Years ago, I received a secret report from Jiaxing. A woman claiming to be a relative of mine had asked the local county office to register two boys under the Xiahou family's household records. She said the boys had been abducted as children and, though their names were in the Xiahou clan's family tree, they still hadn't been officially registered. Now that they'd been found, she wanted to rectify that."

Xiahou Lian froze as realization dawned. "The woman…was my mother. And the two boys—one was me, and the other Chiyan?"

"Exactly. The eldest was Xiahou Chiyan, and the younger child was Xiahou Lian—twin brothers born of one womb. Your mother had bribed the Xiahou family in Jiaxing to add your names to their genealogy. Now you both have proper identities and ancestral roots. You come from an established scholarly family. Your father, Xiahou Yuan, died young, and your mother, Lady Xiahou, raised you alone. Your names are in the government records, and your ancestral home is Jiaxing. You can study to be an official or return home to farm. You're no longer a Qiye Garden assassin nor a rootless wanderer—no more hiding, no more drifting." Shen Jue gazed at him, his lashes casting deep shadows on his face. "Xiahou Lian, your mother left you more than just a house."

Xiahou Lian stared at the thin deed in his hands. A light breeze could have blown away the weightless sheet of paper—yet now it felt as though it weighed a thousand pounds. He pressed a hand to his forehead, shoulders trembling, unsure whether he was laughing or crying.

As a child, he had admired his mother's fame and prowess, dreaming of growing up to be just like her—invincible with a blade. Later, he learned that killing wasn't a game. It meant shedding blood—others' and his own. Operas and stories glorified swordplay and vengeance but never mentioned the rivers of blood or the mountains of sin they left behind. He began to wonder what his life might have been like had he been an ordinary person—waking each day to wash his face, eat three meals, and work until sunset

before returning home to play with his cat or walk his dog before bed. He didn't crave marriage, children, or a long life, just stability and sunlight warming his skin. But he had known that that was a pipe dream. He was steeped in sin, burdened with blood debts. A sinner like him didn't deserve to live.

"Do you hear your mother's wish, Xiahou Lian?" Shen Jue murmured, resting a hand on the other man's shoulder.

"I hear her," Xiahou Lian said hoarsely. "She wants me to live my own life the way I choose. But I'm a sinner. Can I really…? Can I…?" he asked himself.

"You can." Shen Jue's voice was firm. "With me here you can. Xiahou Lian, let the past stay in the past. You can't spend the rest of your life trapped there. You barely made it out of the Garden alive, so why throw yourself back into that fight? If you can't let it go, I'll handle it for you. It might take time to track down those belonging to the Garden, but we'll find a way." His gaze was steady. "At any rate, the Garden is your past. Your future is with me."

Each word sank into Xiahou Lian's heart and warmed it. He didn't know what to say. For all Shen Jue's typical sarcasm and infuriating remarks, his comforting words were more soothing than a toasty blanket. Xiahou Lian had walked a solitary path for too long—engaged in assassinations and escapes, drifting through the world, suffering and bleeding. He had thought himself a tumbleweed doomed to be tossed on the wind, yet now, against all odds, he had landed on solid ground where he could take root and grow.

Suddenly, he had something to look forward to and felt grateful that fate had spared him. Wasn't this what life was about—a warm place to belong, and someone who understood? He didn't have a wife, but…at least he had Shen Jue.

Shen Jue lifted the curtain to leave. The moon hung bright outside, bathing him in silver light.

"It's late—I should go. We'll talk more tomorrow."

Xiahou Lian caught him by the wrist. Shen Jue stiffened for a moment, then turned to look at him. The night was dark, but even in the

dimness, Shen Jue could see the glimmer in his eyes—damp and shimmering like a sky full of stars.

“Shaoye, I had nothing left to live for. These past few years, I’ve been a walking corpse drifting wherever fate took me, ready for death. I didn’t think anyone would remember me anyway.” His voice was rough, but his numb heart stirred, warming slowly. Xiahou Lian lifted his gaze to Shen Jue, and faint cheer touched the corners of his eyes—his long-lost true smile was finally returning to his face. The crushing sorrow that had weighed on him like a tombstone dissipated. He was no longer a wandering ghost but an ordinary man with a name—Xiahou Lian.

“But now, I want to live,” he continued quietly, his voice earnest. “Not for myself—for you. I can’t live for myself, Shaoye. So let me live for you, all right? You’re too good to me; I must’ve piled up lifetimes of virtue to meet you in this one. I have nothing to offer you but my life. Will you accept it?”

Chapter 67:
An Unquenchable Flame

SHEN JUE PRESSED HIS LIPS together in silence for a moment before replying, “Keep your own damn life—I don’t want it. And if someone snatches you up again, and only I can bail you out, don’t come crying to me.”

His tone was sharp, but Xiahou Lian heard the warmth underneath. He tilted his head back and grinned. “You guys at the Eastern Depot still hiring, Shaoye? Hook me up with a job. I’m decent with a blade—I won’t embarrass you.”

Shen Jue considered it. The Eastern Depot was his territory, and having Xiahou Lian there would be better than letting him loaf around in Rouge Lane’s brothels. His gaze flicked over to Xiahou Lian. “Fine. But I don’t play favorites. If you mess up, you’ll be punished just like anyone else, so don’t come to me pleading for mercy.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be on my best behavior!” Xiahou Lian promised.

Shen Jue nodded. He turned toward the flower gate, but Xiahou Lian called out again. “It’s late. Why don’t you stay the night?”

“You just returned, and only the main room’s bedding has been prepared,” Shen Jue replied. “The side rooms aren’t ready yet.”

“Then we’ll share,” said Xiahou Lian.

His words hit Shen Jue like a thunderbolt. Shen Jue stiffened, turning rigidly back. Xiahou Lian stood on the steps, his dark eyes heavy and guileless, moonlight pooling in them as if they were two scattered stars. One corner of Xiahou Lian’s mouth quirked in a roguish grin. Shen Jue knew he shouldn’t cross this line, but another voice inside him screamed, raw and desperate, to stay. He hesitated, rooted to the spot.

Xiahou Lian strode over. “Back when we were kids—” he started, lightly punching Shen Jue’s shoulder. He’d forgotten his hands were still

injured, and pain shot through him the moment he touched Shen Jue. He hissed through his teeth.

Shen Jue sighed, exasperated. He grabbed Xiahou Lian's wrist and blew gently on the injured fingers. "Better?"

"I'm fine," Xiahou Lian said, then picked up where he'd left off. "Back when we were kids, we slept together all the time. What, do you think I stink? Let's make the same deal as before—I'll scrub myself three times."

Shen Jue stared at Xiahou Lian's hands—once lean and strong, they were now battered and broken. His expression darkened. "How could you draw water from the well like that? Stay put. I'll do it."

Xiahou Lian blinked, momentarily stunned that Shen Jue would stoop to fetching bathwater for him. Then he burst out laughing. "The mighty chief of the Eastern Depot hauling bathwater for me? This'll be the fanciest bath I've ever taken—worth the pain!"

Shen Jue shot him a sidelong glance, a look that should have been scolding but instead carried the inexplicable, mesmerizing allure of moonlight rippling across a lake. Xiahou Lian froze for a second, astonished. *Damn*, he thought. *Shen Jue's beauty is unreal.* That old bastard Xie Bingfeng had been nothing special to look at, so just how beautiful must Shen Jue's mother have been to birth a son who looked like this?

Xiahou Lian followed Shen Jue to the kitchen. There, Shen Jue grabbed a bucket, lowered it into the well, and cranked the pulley to draw water. Xiahou Lian wasn't idle—he squatted by the stove, feeding firewood into the flames and blowing the embers until soot smudged his face. Shen Jue poured the well water into a pot and covered it; then he wrung out a damp cloth and handed it to Xiahou Lian to wipe his face.

Xiahou Lian scrubbed at the grime, water dripping down his cheeks and his black hair sticking to his skin like ink. Outside, the cicadas chirped in an endless, rhythmic chorus.

For some reason, Shen Jue thought that this ordinary, domestic life wasn't so bad. It was almost like they were…a married couple. Xiahou Lian handed the cloth back. Shen Jue turned to rinse it in the basin. When he

turned around again, Xiahou Lian had stripped off his shirt and was working on his pants.

For a moment, Shen Jue said nothing; then his Adam's apple bobbed as he rasped, "Xiahou Lian, what are you doing?"

"Bathing." Xiahou Lian twisted his head to glance back, baffled. "What's wrong?"

Shen Jue's gaze snagged on the dip of Xiahou Lian's lower back. He wet his lips. "You're not going to use hot water?"

Xiahou Lian shrugged. "You're the delicate one—you take the heated bath. I've used cold water all my life."

"Fine." Shen Jue barely managed to steady his hammering pulse. "Carry on, then."

Xiahou Lian unwound his waist sash, pulled off his trousers, and tossed the fabric onto a stool in a pile. His bare back faced Shen Jue, his physique tall and lean, carved with dark, defined muscles forged stroke by stroke. This man's body had been honed through blade and fire; every ridge and hollow of its dense musculature hummed with a proud, untamed ferocity. Water sluiced down the raises and dips in his flesh, droplets clinging to the wild, arrogant lines before sliding lower. Shen Jue's gaze tracked them down Xiahou Lian's shoulders and waist, the firm curve of his buttocks, and his straight thighs before they finally vanished at his slender ankles. The sight was was…exceedingly pleasing.

Wrenching his stare away, Shen Jue leaned against the doorframe and pressed his hand to his chest, where his heart hammered. He recognized this sickness. Years in the palace had taught him every shade of desire—tender or fevered, between a man and a woman, and even between women or men. But anything unorthodox was considered sinful.

Soon, Xiahou Lian finished bathing and donned loose silk pants and an open hemp shirt, steam still wafting from his body. His firm chest and stomach gleamed through the parted fabric. "Your bath's ready. It was pretty hot, so I mixed some cold water in—go check to see whether it's warm enough for you."

Shen Jue hummed. He washed up, then padded to the bedroom where Xiahou Lian already lay in bed, hands folded neatly over his stomach. Shen

Jue blew out the candle and slid in beside him. Darkness settled over them like a shawl; they could hear one another breathing in the quiet night. As that night deepened, moonlight seeped through cracks in the doors and windows, washing over the snuffed candles, climbing the carved bed, and filtering through the gauzy mosquito net to flow slowly over their forms.

Shen Jue's sleepiness was gone; with Xiahou Lian breathing right beside him, he couldn't fall asleep. He turned his head. Xiahou Lian's face was slightly angled in his direction; his hair spilled toward Shen Jue, ink-black in the dark. Desire arose within Shen Jue, and his fingers crept forward. Just as he was about to brush a lock of Xiahou Lian's hair, the other man suddenly opened his eyes. Shen Jue's heart thumped hard, and he immediately closed his eyes and went still.

“You awake, Shaoye?”

Shen Jue didn’t speak for a moment. “…No.”

“Can I strip off?” Xiahou Lian rolled over, making the bedframe creak. “I’m fucking roasting here.”

Shen Jue opened his eyes to watch Xiahou Lian untie the fastenings on his shirt, the contours of his waist faintly visible like the hazy silhouette of a mirage through mist. It was utterly mesmerizing. In the darkness, Shen Jue’s gaze gradually deepened. “Go ahead,” he said.

Xiahou Lian rolled over and sat up, stripping off his shirt and trousers in a few swift motions so only his thin white undergarments remained. Reaching over Shen Jue, he pushed aside the bed curtain and carelessly tossed out his clothes. For a fleeting moment, his bare chest brushed past Shen Jue, radiating scorching heat. Then Xiahou Lian lay back down, his breathing soon steadying into the slow rhythm of sleep.

Shen Jue stared fixedly at Xiahou Lian’s back, the fever in his eyes intensifying bit by bit, as if something inside him had ignited, making his emotions surge like a mountain torrent. His fingers slowly approached the cool locks of Xiahou Lian’s hair and wound them around his fingertips—once, twice, then over and over. He didn’t dare venture beyond the cascading black locks, daring only to toy with the ends in silence, letting the fire in his heart slowly scorch the tip of his tongue.

You’re the one who provoked me, Xiahou Lian. *Don’t blame me.*

He inhaled deeply, letting Xiahou Lian’s scent drift into his lungs and suffuse his entire being.

Xiahou Lian.

Xiahou Lian.

Lian.

Shen Jue silently repeated the name, lingering on the final syllable —“Lian.” He pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth, curled it slightly, then gently slid it back down. He pronounced the name softly, his lips and teeth clinging to the sound as if unwilling to part from it. He murmured it again and again, grinding it between his teeth and finally swallowing it whole.

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SHEN WENXING STOOD BEHIND Shen Jue's chair. "Have you seen the newly submitted memorials, Godfather? The old fossils from the Six Ministries are pressing you to hand over the tiger tally." He massaged Shen Jue's shoulders with loosely clenched fists, his rapid, soothing strikes landing precisely on the embroidered pythons of Shen Jue's robes; it was enormously soothing. Serving others was a fundamental skill for eunuchs. Shen Jue too had learned these techniques, though no one would dare ask him for a massage these days.

Shen Wenxing smiled, eyes curving, and continued. "Have those Confucian scholars lost their minds from reading too much? Once meat falls into a dog's mouth, who's ever heard of asking for it back?" As the words left his mouth, his expression changed—had he just implied that Shen Jue was a dog? Shen Wenxing immediately dropped to his knees and began slapping his own face. "Forgive your worthless godson's foul mouth! What nonsense am I spouting?! I deserve to be beaten! I deserve it!"

Shen Jue wordlessly glanced sidelong at him. His expression was as inscrutable as ever, impossible to read. Shen Wenxing groaned inwardly, since this left him with no choice but to keep slapping himself.

A clerk approached to present a stack of memorials. "The Grand Secretariat have drafted their responses. His Majesty is still young, and he tires after reading just a few. Should these still be sent for his vermilion endorsements?"[6]

"Take the most confusing, long-winded ones to Left Censor-in-Chief Xu Kaixian. With his so-called scholarly heritage, he loves drowning trivial matters in classical allusions—he's perfect for the task." Shen Jue rose from his chair and walked to the birdcage, sparing Shen Wenxing a glance. "Enough. Stop hitting yourself. You've followed me for so many years, yet you still haven't learned to be cautious with your words. I suppose you truly can't polish a turd."

The clerks and secretaries nearby cringed at Shen Jue's obvious anger.

Shen Wenxing grimaced. "Your reprimand is just, Godfather."

"Those old men fear I'll become another Qiu Shiliang." Shen Jue snorted. "Forget it! My head isn't big enough for that hat. The Three Great Camps obeyed my orders before only by the grace of the late emperor. The tiger tally proved that I spoke for the emperor in an emergency. Without it, what authority do I have to command armies? Unless His Majesty issues an edict naming me a general, keeping the tally would be nothing but trouble."

A secretary bowed. "You mean we must surrender it, Chief?"

"Mm," Shen Jue said faintly. "Our true power lies in controlling the vermilion endorsements. Should the emperor wish to play, let him. The other day, I watched him dismantle a chair for fun. Find some rare wood and send it to the palace. And gather some folk toys, like nine-linked rings and storybooks." Shen Jue narrowed his eyes, clasping his hands behind his back. "Just don't let him study. If he remains unlearned and ignorant, our position will remain secure."

"The chief is wise!" The crowd dispersed in high spirits to carry out his orders.

Shen Jue sent someone to summon Situ Jin. He flipped open a memorial while he waited, but the cramped script seemed to shift before his eyes and transform slowly into Xiahou Lian's outline. The vermilion brush hovered in his grip, failing to mark a single character. Not even the shrewdest man could escape the snares of love. Shen Jue tossed the brush aside and rubbed his temples.

Situ Jin arrived and bowed. "Chief."

"Xiahou Lian will report to the Eastern Depot soon," Shen Jue responded lazily. "Assign him to the Chen Unit. We haven't yet purged the last of Wei De's lackeys, and the Depot remains a mix of fish and dragons with too many useless bribed fools." His lip curled in disgust. "The agents in the Chen Unit are all trustworthy. They're the only ones who know Xiahou Lian's identity. Tell Xu Ruoyu to look after him. Keep him away from dangerous assignments and go easy on his evaluations. Pass word of this discreetly—no one else is to know."

“Understood,” replied Situ Jin.

Chapter 68:
Petals Floating Along the Water

THE HOLLOW CLACKS OF THE NIGHT watchmen's bamboo clappers sounded from the depths of the pitch-black street, followed by their hoarse cries: "It's a dry night! Beware of fire!"

On either side of the street, Xiahou Lian and a squad of Eastern Depot agents lay in ambush. His figure, pressed against a pillar, melted into the shadows alongside his fellow agents. Their black uniforms blended seamlessly with the darkness, only the embroidered pythons on their chests and backs glinting with fleeting, sinister gold. Resting their left hands on the hilts of their goose-quill sabers, they breathed as lightly as settling dust.

Today marked Xiahou Lian's third day as an officer of the Eastern Depot's Chen Unit. Their mission tonight was to ambush Li Xian, a fleeing holdout from Wei De's faction, on Qianmen Street. Xiahou Lian flexed his fingers, the tight scars tingling faintly. He'd spent half a month recuperating at home, even getting his missing teeth replaced. He hadn't planned to bother with that—the gaps weren't visible, just irksome when chewing meat—but Shen Jue had forced his head down and insisted on ivory replacements.

Whatever. Even the most heavily piled debts wouldn't crush a man's body.

Xiahou Lian had asked Shen Jue about Tang Shiqi's whereabouts only to be told that he'd likely escaped. Xiahou Lian had sighed in relief—when he found objects from his hideouts in Shen Jue's possession, he feared the worst. Shen Jue had also returned various possessions of Xiahou Lian's—weapons, clothes, and even shoes—claiming that he'd been "safeguarding" them from theft. That said, why anyone would steal fire-warding paintings,[7] sweat towels, or undergarments was beyond Xiahou Lian.

He still went by "Xiahou Lian." The name was common enough, and his altered appearance shielded him from suspicion. Some among Shen

Jue's inner circle likely guessed his identity, but many of them had their own shady history. Most of the men Shen Jue trusted hailed from the jianghu—they were former bandits, salt smugglers, and even pirates, all rehabilitated under Shen Jue's protection. They saw Xiahou Lian as just another of their master's talented recruits.

The distant rumble of carriage wheels echoed down the street. Across from Xiahou Lian, Xu Ruoyu mimicked a bird call with pursed lips. The Eastern Depot agents all tensed instantly, gripping their saber hilts in their right hands and pressing their bodies to the pillars as they peered into the dark. Xu Ruoyu, chief of the Chen Unit, was the man who'd once impersonated the prince of Fu. Supposedly he'd been an opera performer at one point. His usually cheerful face was now steel-cold, every line sharp with lethal intent.

Two carriages rolled into view, soon reaching the middle of Qianmen Street. Eastern Depot agents flowed into the street, their crossbows leveled. Xu Ruoyu flashed his badge. "Eastern Depot apprehending suspects!" he cried. "All inside, step out for inspection!"

The carriages sat still, eerily silent. The agents stiffened—there was no coachman on either vehicle. The carriages had simply halted like hearses from the underworld.

"I'll say it again—step out!"

A thin, shrill whistle split the air. Xiahou Lian's brow twitched. Shoving Xu Ruoyu aside, he drew his saber in one fluid motion, the blade flashing like mercury. Twin black darts slammed into the metal mid-draw, two tiny silver sparks bursting forth like fireflies.

"Loose arrows! Advance!" Xu Ruoyu roared.

Crossbow bolts shot into the night, whistling as they buried themselves in the carriage curtains. But after only a couple of muffled thuds, all went silent as if the bolts had vanished into some nameless void. The agents put away their crossbows and drew their goose-quill sabers, the gilded handles and sword guards gleaming in the darkness.

Xiahou Lian leaped onto the carriage railing and unleashed several slashes, reducing the curtains to ribbons. The shredded fabric fluttered to the ground, revealing an empty carriage—no one was inside! *Something's*

wrong, Xiahou Lian realized, but it was already too late. As a chill went down his spine, his assassin's instinct compelled him to look up. As a frigid, deadly arc of light descended, an ear-splitting screech erupted from beneath his feet—and a blade pierced the wooden floorboards!

He was being ambushed from above *and* below!

Xiahou Lian rolled into the carriage's compartment, shredding his hem on the protruding steel. He propelled himself toward the rear panel without pause, his saber ahead of him. The blade punched through the wooden partition with brutal force followed by the dull, wet thunk of steel piercing flesh. Crimson blood welled along the blade's fuller, the gold-inlaid patterns intertwining with scarlet with savage, grotesque beauty. Xiahou Lian slammed forward again, knocking in the panel entirely as he burst through into the night. The shattered wood crashed to the ground in a hail of splinters, revealing the black-clad swordsman pinned beneath.

These assassins had been lurking like spiders, clinging to the carriage's rear panel and crawling beneath its chassis. "Look above and below!" Xiahou Lian bellowed in warning.

The Eastern Depot agents swiftly surrounded the carriage and hurled iron grappling hooks that bit deep into the vehicle's sides. Coordinated force from both their flanks wrenched the carriage's entire frame apart. In the explosion of wooden shards, a figure dropped from the roof; his narrow, straight blade gleamed frost-white in the dust-choked air. Another assailant scrambled up from below to stand back-to-back with his comrade. These agents rushed forward, and the night instantly erupted in a tempest of clashing steel, their blades locking and producing sparks like metallic rain.

Xiahou Lian approached the second carriage and rapped its shaft sharply with the flat of his blade. "Get out."

A skeletal hand drew the curtain aside to reveal a gaunt-faced man. A woman and two children—a boy and a girl, each around ten years old—huddled behind him in the darkness. It was Li Xian and his family.

Li Xian met Xiahou Lian's gaze, his lips trembling. "You know Shen Jue's methods as well as I do. Spare me, and I'll give you everything I own!"

“No.” Xiahou Lian continued tapping the carriage shaft with his blade, the rhythmic knocking like a death knell. “Out.”

“You’re a capable man! Why debase yourself as Shen Jue’s lapdog?”

Xiahou Lian smirked in disdain. “Better his lapdog than Wei De’s drowned rat.” Flicking his tongue over his lips, he added, “Besides, my chief is a beauty. Forget being his lapdog—I’d gladly be the mud beneath his feet!”

“You—!” Li Xian’s eyes darkened. “In that case…forgive my offense!”

A blinding arc of steel flashed as Li Xian erupted from the carriage, his three-foot blade descending like a mountain landslide. Xiahou Lian twisted his grip, his own saber screeching along his opponent’s blade. The reflected glare forced Li Xian to shut his eyes instinctively, and a powerful kick sent him crashing backward into the carriage shaft. Pain exploded through his back. Xiahou Lian flipped his blade, swinging the flat toward Li Xian’s neck to knock him unconscious.

Li Xian assumed that Xiahou Lian intended to kill him, and his eyes bulged in terror. With desperate strength, he yanked the young girl from the carriage, holding her before himself as a shield. Xiahou Lian barely managed to halt his blade an inch from her forehead. Seizing his chance, Li Xian shoved the girl violently at Xiahou Lian, then swung his saber.

He intended to cleave through them both!

The blade’s cold, biting wind frosted Xiahou Lian’s face. The girl’s weight pinned his right arm, preventing him from swinging. In that split second, instinct took over, and Xiahou Lian spun around holding the girl in his arms, turning his back to the incoming slash. Shoulder prickling with cold dread, he shut his eyes and awaited the impending strike—but the blow he expected never came.

Xiahou Lian’s eyes snapped open to see Shen Jue standing beside him, holding Jingtie. Looking down the dark steel’s length, Xiahou Lian saw its tip buried in Li Xian’s chest, their target’s blood pattering steadily onto the ground. Li Xian stared dumbly at the blade. His sword slipped from his fingers and clattered to the ground.

The girl in Xiahou Lian's arms buried her face in his shirt and burst into muffled sobs. Shen Jue's glare at the child could have frozen flame. As the agents finished dispatching the remaining swordsmen and hurried over to pay their respects to Shen Jue, the chief surveyed the scene with icy amusement.

"We happened to be passing by, and we thought we'd observe the unit at work," Shen Jue said. "Truly eye-opening—so much effort, just for Li Xian!" When he noticed the child still clinging to Xiahou Lian, his expression twisted into a savage snarl. "Why are you still holding that brat, Xiahou Lian? Can't bear to let her go?!"

Xiahou Lian looked at him silently, then tried to pass the child back to the woman, only for her to shove the girl away violently. The child fell hard, cracking her head on the ground.

"Useless thing!" the woman shrieked, stomping her foot as the girl lay crumpled on the ground, sobbing. "Couldn't even block a blade properly! Now your father's dead—we're all finished!"

Xiahou Lian immediately scooped the child up, checking her injury as he snarled at the woman, "Are you insane?! You'd want your own daughter take a blade for you?!"

"She's not my daughter; she's a little bitch born to some whore! She killed her own mother, and now she's killed her father, too!" the woman raved as if unhinged.

Shen Jue's patience wore thin, and he signaled the agents to drag the woman away. The boy stumbled after them wailing for his mother, and their cries faded into the night like ghostly howls. Xiahou Lian set the girl down on some steps on the street, wrapping her bleeding forehead with his handkerchief. He asked her name, but she just kept crying, her tiny face flushed red from her tears. At a loss, he glanced back at the street; agents were cleaning up, hauling away the bodies and carriages.

Xu Ruoyu approached Shen Jue and gestured at the girl. Shen Jue responded with visible irritation, and Xu Ruoyu walked away. Soon, the street emptied. The girl sat silently, exhausted from crying, and refused to answer any questions.

“Enough dawdling,” Shen Jue said as he walked over. “Send her to the Ministry of Justice. She belongs with her stepmother.”

“I hear that the female relatives of convicted officials get sent to the Royal Academy.[8] But she’s just a kid—does she really have to go there too?” asked Xiahou Lian.

“Where else? Do you want to raise her or something?” Shen Jue replied coldly.

Xiahou Lian stood and nudged Shen Jue with his elbow. “C’mon, Shaoye. Help me out. A word from you could fix this—who’d dare refuse you? The girl’s pitiful. Have a heart.”

Shen Jue glanced at the girl; her face was a snotty, tear-streaked mess. Displeased, he muttered, “She’s not my child. Why should I care?”

Xiahou Lian grinned at him shamelessly. “Because I’m begging you, Shaoye! Take pity on *me*! I nearly died saving her! Sending her to the Royal Academy would make that pointless!”

Amid Xiahou Lian’s pleas, Shen Jue heard only “take pity on me.” Xiahou Lian was one of his people; who would care for him if not Shen Jue? His resolve softened; still, he worried that Xiahou Lian might want to collect every stray they encountered. He scowled. “Fine—but just this once. The Wei faction’s fallout is spreading wide, and we toss people into the Royal Academy every day. I’m not running a temple here, and I’m not some bodhisattva taking in every lost soul.”

“I know,” Xiahou Lian said. “I’m no saint myself—just helping where I can.” He paused, scratching his head. “But where should we put her? I don’t know squat about kids, and my place is empty except for me.”

Shen Jue summoned an attendant to carry the girl away. “Lianxiang can handle it. She invited you to dinner tomorrow for the Mid-Autumn Festival. There’s a palace banquet, so I might not make it back to join you—don’t wait for me.”

As Shen Jue’s carriage disappeared into the distance, Xiahou Lian slung his saber over his shoulder and ambled home.

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IN CISHOU PALACE, the empress dowager sat before her bronze mirror, fingers delicately adjusting the intricate hairstyle atop her head. Zhuxia opened her vanity case, and Her Majesty selected a pair of gold hairpins adorned with gemstone butterflies frolicking among flowers. As Zhuxia carefully secured them in her mistress's coiled tresses, she said, "His Majesty's schoolwork has been delivered. Would you care to review it, Your Majesty?"

The empress dowager rested her hand on Zhuxia's arm and replied languidly, "Very well. Let's see it."

The young emperor's calligraphy and essays lay unfurled across a table in the outer chamber. As soon as the empress dowager glanced at the papers, her temper flared. The emperor's characters sprawled like drunken ants, and despite months of studying the *Mencius*, his compositions remained nonsensical drivel.

Slamming the table, the empress dowager snapped, "Summon the emperor at once! His mother has questions for him!"

Zhuxia urged her to calm down, but the dispatched servant soon returned empty-handed. "His Majesty is enjoying himself at the big cat enclosure. He said you can relay any instructions you have—there's no need for him to come personally."

The empress dowager nearly collapsed in rage. "What rebelliousness! He dares to ignore his own mother's summons? Who is with him?"

"Young Shen-gonggong and Jiang-gonggong…" the attendant whispered. "When this servant arrived, young Shen-gonggong was playing the horse for His Majesty to ride."

"So it's Shen Jue's pack of murderous dogs yet again!" The empress dowager clenched her fists so tightly her crimson nails drew blood from her palms.

Zhuxia shooed away the onlookers and pried open the empress dowager's bleeding hands. "Don't torment yourself! It's Shen Wenxing and his fellow scoundrels leading His Majesty astray, so he spends his time cavorting at the big cat enclosure or sawing wood in Qianqing Palace!

Chief Shen has no time to discipline them—he is overwhelmed managing both the Eastern Depot and the inner palace's affairs. Please let your servant speak to him at once!"

Once she calmed down, the empress dowager examined her lacerated palms. As Zhuxia powdered her hands with golden wound medicine, Her Majesty studied the maid's glossy hairline and pleasing features. Why hadn't Zhuxia been able to win Shen Jue's affection? The empress dowager's elaborate scheme to place Zhuxia by his side had seemingly failed. Perhaps all men were fickle—especially those missing critical anatomy. Romance and desire would move them even less.

"Have matters between you and Shen Jue progressed?" the empress dowager inquired.

Zhuxia blushed. "He sent Shen Wenxing over with some rouge for me just a few days ago, supposedly something the Eastern Depot acquired from Korea. They even gave it the delightful name 'Matchless Spring.' Your servant happened to be occupied that day and returned rather late. Poor Shen Wenxing spent half the day waiting impatiently in the blistering sun, insisting that Eunuch Shen specifically instructed him to deliver the rouge into your servant's hands."

The empress dowager arched an eyebrow. "Oh? I don't recall him being so attentive in the past."

Zhuxia carefully tucked away the medicine. "Don't you remember, Your Majesty?" she asked. "Shen-gonggong was still beholden to that bastard Wei De before; he couldn't be so brazen, but he was still very thoughtful. He secretly sent me hairpins, bracelets, and handkerchiefs, and he said such sweet things whenever we crossed paths. Once, he even asked about my abdominal cramps. I was terribly confused, wondering how he knew it was my time. Do you know what he said? He told me he'd noticed that I wasn't with you that day, and thought that it was strange, so he specifically sent someone to look into it—that's how he learned I was unwell."

Delighted, the empress dowager poked Zhuxia's shoulder. "You sly thing, keeping this from me all this time!"

Zhuxia shot her a chiding glance and squirmed away. "How can your servant tell you such things? Am I supposed to run to you, saying 'Oh,

Shen-gonggong sent me a handkerchief yesterday!’ or ‘Shen-gonggong sent me more jewelry today!’? It’d be too embarrassing!”

The empress dowager smiled slowly. As she’d predicted, love was a bottomless pit that no one could escape from, not even a eunuch. She dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief, affecting a sorrowful look. “Ah, you’ve been by my side for so many years, Zhuxia. Seeing you marry well will truly gladden my heart! But Shen Jue… He’s simply too difficult to manage. Just look at His Majesty—all he does is fool around all day, neglecting his studies. Shen Jue wants to ruin my child!”

Zhuxia was quickly becoming frantic. “You’re mistaken, Your Majesty! But I’ll summon him here for an explanation right now, and if he’s done something wrong, please punish him!”

The empress dowager shook her head, taking Zhuxia’s hands in her own. “I know your heart lies with me, and I have no desire for open conflict with Shen Jue either. Our only recourse now is to strip him of his title—let him tumble from grace and draw all his murderous dogs from His Majesty’s side so the emperor can focus on his studies! Don’t fret. Removing Shen Jue’s authority needn’t mean punishing or mistreating him. He can remain in the Directorate of the Ceremonial as an attendant scribe, free to choose his own duties. Think about it—when your status surpasses his, he’ll have to obey your every word, won’t he?”

Zhuxia knitted her brows tightly and knelt. “Your Majesty speaks wisely. Rest assured that this servant understands your priorities.”

“Your task is to secure Shen Jue’s affections. When necessary, you’ll gather intelligence for me—I must know where I stand.” The empress dowager’s grip on Zhuxia’s hands slowly tightened. “Tomorrow is the Mid-Autumn Festival, but with the mourning period for the late emperor still in effect, the palace celebrations will be modest; I’ll send Shen Jue home early to rest. You’ll go to his residence first—make all the preparations, and do so well. Men adore virtuous homemakers, after all, and once they’ve weathered the storms outside, they long to come home to a woman’s warmth. Shen Jue’s mansion is reportedly quite bleak—how could such a grand estate truly thrive without a proper mistress?—so put some effort into making it lively. Do you understand?”

Zhuxia nodded emphatically.

Chapter 69:
A Heart Cold as Iron

XIAHOU LIAN SAT ON THE VERANDA crafting rabbit lanterns while Lianxiang's son, Rongge, and another maid's daughter sat beside him and watched eagerly. The children were around four or five years old and wore new outfits, their cheeks rosy and their foreheads dotted with vermilion to resemble the child attendants beside bodhisattvas.

Xiahou Lian lifted the softened reed strips from a basin of water. First, he fashioned the lantern's frame, twisting two reeds into a hoop for the body, then reinforcing it with two more reeds threaded crosswise through the center. The head was simpler—just two circles joined together with an extra strip pulled up to form the ears. With that, the lantern's skeleton was complete.

The children watched in wide-eyed fascination.

Xiahou Lian glanced up absentmindedly and spotted the girl he'd rescued the previous night peeking out from behind one of the walkway's pillars. Lianxiang had told him the girl's name was Li Miaozhen. She was an unacknowledged daughter of the Li family—a motherless child the first wife likely mistreated, given the girl's reticence and frighteningly thin frame. She had originally been destined for the Royal Academy until Shen Jue intervened to reclassify her as a government servant assigned to his household. Dressed in new garments—a navy-blue jacket and pale-green skirt—she peered over with dark, gleaming eyes but remained silent. The moment Xiahou Lian looked at her, she ducked back behind the pillar.

Chuckling, Xiahou Lian bent his head to finish gluing the paper strips. Worried the children might tear them, he applied three sturdy sheets of oilpaper. Then he painted on the eyes with crimson ink before hanging the lanterns on rods and attaching small tassels to the bottom. As he lifted his hand, two round, plump rabbit lanterns swayed cheerfully at his fingertips. The children cheered in excitement, stretching out their hands to grab at the lanterns, but Xiahou Lian raised the lanterns out of their reach and said, "Go get that jiejie."

The children shouted promises to do so and scampered over to tug at Li Miaozhen's sleeve. Looking as if she might burst into tears, she shuffled reluctantly forward. Xiahou Lian swiftly crafted a third lantern, painting on the eyes and hanging it on a rod, then distributed the lanterns to one child at a time. "Everybody gets one!" he declared.

The two younger children ran off with their lanterns, cheering, while Li Miaozhen remained standing where she was, cradling the rabbit in her hands.

"Did you want to tell me something?" Xiahou Lian asked her.

From within her robe, she slowly withdrew a mutton-fat jade pendant wrapped carefully in a handkerchief and offered it to Xiahou Lian.

"For me?"

Li Miaozhen nodded. "Thank you for saving me," she whispered. Her voice was as faint as a mosquito's buzz; Xiahou Lian strained to hear her. Lowering her head farther, Li Miaozhen added, "My mother left this pendant to me. She said that…one must repay kindness. I have no money; I only have this pendant to give you."

Xiahou Lian laughed softly and ruffled her hair. "I can't take what your mother left you. Keep it safe. Someday when you have money, you can repay me then. I'm not greedy—just one copper coin will do. Now go play."

Miaozhen nodded emphatically and pattered away, swinging her rabbit lantern. Xiahou Lian stretched lazily, then gathered up the water basin and parchment and headed toward Shen Jue's courtyard. The courtyard was desolate—Shen Jue disliked having others enter his private domain, and only a few young servants and Lianxiang were permitted to clean it. Under the darkening sky, the dappled shadows of trees swayed over the courtyard stones, leaves rustling as the wind whipped through. The courtyard lacked the picturesque beauty present elsewhere in the manor, which tended to mimic the stately landscapes of scholarly paintings. Those areas had been designed to impress guests, whereas this courtyard was Shen Jue's own private realm.

As Xiahou Lian reflected on it, he realized Shen Jue was truly a man of contradictions. Despite wielding immense power, he lived as ascetically

as a monk, indifferent to culinary pleasure and immune to feminine charm. His vast courtyard held only two vases of withered lotuses and a lone pear tree; it was devoid of all other adornment. The gray-tiled walls and whitewashed surfaces exuded a desolate chill reminiscent of an abandoned ruin completely lacking in human warmth. The world only saw Shen Jue in grand halls, wearing embroidered robes adorned with phoenix-patterned belts and surrounded by officials in majestic splendor; no one witnessed his solitary existence in this humble courtyard, clad in plain white garments, his heart still as undisturbed water.

After sitting in the courtyard for a while, Xiahou Lian began to feel drowsy, and he headed inside to nap. He was deep asleep when a clamor erupted outside. The bed curtains were yanked open, and bright light flooded in. Xiahou Lian blinked groggily as several servants tugged his limbs, dragging him upright. Instantly awake at that point, he struggled fiercely, squeezing through the cluster of servants to grab his clothes from the sandalwood rack. “What the hell are you doing?!” he shouted, startled and furious.

A woman’s shrill voice rang from the door. “Audacious slave! sneaking into the master’s quarters to laze around while he’s away! Where is Lianxiang? Summon her at once!”

Xiahou Lian turned to see a voluptuous woman standing in the doorway. Her hair was in an asymmetrical bun adorned with pearls and jade. Beneath her ears hung sapphire pendants that glimmered like suspended dewdrops in the sunlight.

A maidservant supported the woman as she entered and seated herself on a drum stool. Her features had been unclear earlier, backlit by the sun, but now Xiahou Lian saw her properly. Her face was round and plump—auspiciously so—but caked with excessive powder, which added years to her appearance. Women had taken to wearing such heavy makeup that even their own mothers wouldn’t have recognized them, and Xiahou Lian couldn’t begin to guess this woman’s age.

The only true master of the Shen residence was Shen Jue, yet this woman had called Xiahou Lian “slave” out of nowhere. Unsure of her background, Xiahou Lian could only bow decorously and said, “My humble self has poor eyesight. May I ask which household you belong to, Lady?

The chief’s courtyard is off-limits to outsiders, so it would be best if you left quickly.”

People streamed in behind the woman. Turning to look outside, Xiahou Lian saw servants hauling away the two vases of withered lotuses and replacing them with pots of daphne, peonies, chrysanthemums, and pomegranate flowers, cramming the courtyard with a gaudy explosion of color. Others hung palace lanterns—red, green, and every hue in between—from the trees, turning the place into a garish mess. Xiahou Lian was dumbfounded. What the hell was happening?

The woman cast him a cold glance. “Who am I? The mistress of this household!”

Xiahou Lian was stunned. When had Shen Jue gotten another mother?

Lifting a teacup with practiced grace, the woman took a delicate sip, and sighed. “I know the chief rarely returns and treats his servants generously, but some ungrateful wretches are evidently growing bold in his absence, acting like they own the place! Today, I caught you sleeping in the chief’s bed, but who knows what else you’ve done behind closed doors? Tomorrow you might even steal the family silver! No matter. Since the chief is merciful, I’ll play the villain. Servants! Take this lazy good-for-nothing away. No need to punish him excessively—just give him twenty lashes and sell him off. He’s never to set foot in the Shen residence again!”

Xiahou Lian was speechless. He’d never been good at dealing with the fairer sex. Indeed, he’d so rarely encountered any proper women that he’d practically developed a psychological complex around them. He steeled himself. “You misunderstand, Lady,” he said. “My humble self is not a servant of the residence but an officer of the Eastern Depot. The chief himself permitted me to rest in his courtyard. If you don’t believe me, you may ask him directly.”

Lianxiang rushed over, flustered. “You truly are mistaken, Lady! Officer Xiahou is an old retainer of the chief’s, just like me. He has saved the chief from peril so many times that their bond runs deep. Officer Xiahou isn’t even required to announce himself, and he can openly go anywhere in the manor—everyone in the household knows this!”

“Oh, is that so?” Zhuxia looked Xiahou Lian up and down. He wore plain black hemp clothing that might be charitably described as inconspicuous—but putting it more bluntly, his robes were downright shabby. A faint, perfunctory smile curled Zhuxia’s lips. “Well, that just shows how kindhearted our chief is! No one knows him better than I do; he always remembers old favors, even those over a decade past. Still, some people should know their place. The chief may afford them dignity, but they shouldn’t presume to cling to him shamelessly!”

Zhuxia withdrew several silver and gold coins from her embroidered purse and handed them to one of her maids. “I can guess why you visited the residence during such a big festival. Even emperors have their humble kin, so our chief would have them too. Here—this is for you. Take it and make use of it. We’ll be quite busy today preparing for the chief’s evening return, so I’m afraid we can’t entertain you further. Servants, see our guest out.”

The maid presented Xiahou Lian with the stack of silver and gold coins. He regarded Zhuxia coolly but made no move to accept the silver. Instead, he simply uttered a brief farewell and turned to walk out. *Truly, the bigger the forest, the more varied the birds. Whatever.* He was a grown man, and he wouldn’t squabble with some ignorant woman.

Lianxiang twisted a handkerchief, agitated, as she followed Xiahou Lian out. “Who does she think she is, throwing her weight around as if Shaoye actually cared for her?!” she fumed. “She makes my blood boil! Xiao-Lian, you go on back first. I’ll speak to Shaoye about this later—see if he doesn’t make her regret it!”

“It’s fine,” Xiahou Lian said, but then he asked, “Just who was that woman?”

Lianxiang hesitated, struggling internally. Eventually she said, “Fine, I’ll tell you! Shaoye forbade me to speak of it, but I can’t bottle it up any longer!” She pulled Xiahou Lian aside to a secluded spot. “The late emperor bestowed her on the young master to be his ‘companion’!”

Xiahou Lian was stunned. So Shen Jue already had a wife!

“You’ve spent your years roaming the jianghu, Xiao-Lian—you wouldn’t understand palace affairs! The so-called masters and nobles spew all sorts of pretty words about arranging marriages and setting up

households, but they treat it like pairing cats or dogs, making whatever matches amuse and please them! It was never taken into account that our shaoye, having suffered such immense trauma, has long since…long since…" Lianxiang began to weep, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. In a choked voice, she continued, "…long since been incapable of consummation! Placing a woman before him when he can't… Isn't that tantamount to simply stabbing him in the heart?"

Xiahou Lian frowned. "Can't she be sent away? It's not like he's touched her."

Lianxiang shook her head. "Impossible! She's the empress dowager's personal maid—a companion in name, but really, just a spy! Shaoye may have some power, but he's not the true boss here—how could he just dismiss her? Still, that woman causes problems every time she comes to our residence; she's never satisfied unless she's stirring up trouble. Frankly, she's just throwing her weight around! In the palace, she serves others, but here, she can play the mistress—and she makes damn sure everyone knows it. This time, she's using you to make her point! Xiao-Lian, I'm so sorry."

Xiahou Lian waved it off. He thought for a moment, then smiled. "All right, then. I didn't buy groceries today anyway, so I have nothing to cook at home. I think I'll just plant myself here, and we'll see what that wench can do about it!" Straightening his clothes, he strode back purposefully, the stunned Lianxiang hurrying after him with quick steps.

Zhuxia was still in the courtyard, seated by the square table. The main gate stood open as she pointed imperiously at the servants present, directing their flower arrangements and porcelain placement. Xiahou Lian entered with his hand on his goose-quill saber and sat unceremoniously at the table, slapping his blade down with a loud clattering noise.

Zhuxia jumped up in fright, clutching her chest as she stumbled back several steps. "Y-you! How dare you return?!"

Lianxiang stood beside Xiahou Lian, equally dumbfounded.

Xiahou Lian propped his chin on his hand as he eyed Zhuxia. He arched an eyebrow, which lent his expression an unbridled, roguish glint. "Sister-in-Law, you seem unaware that I, Xiahou Lian, am the chief's sworn brother. Your grace and reputation precede you, and now that we've met, I

must say you're far beyond even what I imagined!" He flashed her a wide grin. "So how about we have a little chat, Sister-in-Law?"

Zhuxia's brows shot up in outrage. "What could I possibly have to say to you? Servants! Drag this ruffian out at once!"

As several of the unfamiliar attendants Zhuxia had brought stepped forward immediately to seize him, Xiahou Lian nudged his saber's guard with his thumb, sliding the blade partway out of its sheath. "Blades have no eyes, my friends," he said. "It'd be a shame to spill blood on the chief's own property."

The men hesitated, exchanging wary glances, and Zhuxia trembled with fury, opening her mouth to retort.

Xiahou Lian cut her off. "Sister-in-Law, I urge you to tread carefully. The bond between the chief and me was forged through life-and-death battles. A woman as pampered as you may not fully grasp what that means." He rolled up his sleeve to reveal his scars. "See this one? That nearly cost me an arm, but I took it gladly for the chief. And this one, and this one, and this one too—all for him!"

Zhuxia paled at Xiahou Lian's gruesome lattice of wounds, her confidence faltering. She'd felt entitled to play the villain and eject him when she believed he was merely some penniless leech the chief tolerated out of nostalgic sentimentality, but this man was seemingly no easy pickings. She forced a smile. "Ah, so it's you, Xiahou-xiongdi! Your foolish sister-in-law was blind and misjudged you, dear brother. Servants! Bring tea at once!"

As the two sat facing each other, Zhuxia's agitation mounted. She desperately willed Xiahou Lian to leave before Shen Jue returned. She'd envisioned spending a private night moon-watching with the chief—would she actually be expected to share their Mid-Autumn feast with this thug? Surely not—a mere agent would never dine at the master's table. Still uneasy, she summoned wine and appetizers, hoping Xiahou Lian would drink himself into a stupor and be hauled out afterward.

Yet against all her expectations, Xiahou Lian downed two entire flasks of wine without faltering and sat steady as a boulder, looking perfectly capable of battling another three hundred servings. Zhuxia sulked in silence.

At long last, as dusk fell, Shen Jue returned from the palace. Xiahou Lian and Zhuxia were sitting in the main hall facing one another when approaching footsteps echoed from the courtyard. Zhuxia got up eagerly. In the dimming light, a travel-worn and weary Shen Jue strode through the gate only to be confronted with a garish riot of color that nearly made him doubt that he'd entered the right residence. Turning his head, he spotted Zhuxia standing by the door—and beyond her, Xiahou Lian seated at the table, grinning at him.

Zhuxia hurried over the threshold with small, delicate steps to greet him. Before she reached him, though, a dark figure darted past, cutting in front of her and seizing Shen Jue's hand.

"Xiao-Jue, you're back!" Xiahou Lian clasped Shen Jue's hand in one of his own, lightly looping his other hand around Shen Jue's waist to guide him inside to the table. Not missing a beat, he called to the servants, "Hurry up with the dishes!"

"'Xiao-Jue'?" Zhuxia was stunned.

Xiahou Lian slapped his forehead in mock realization. "Ah—I got too excited and used his childhood nickname! You wouldn't know, Sister-in-Law, but the chief and I are so close that we've always called each other by special nicknames. I call him Xiao-Jue, and he calls me Xiao-Lian." He turned to Shen Jue. "Isn't that right, Xiao-Jue?"

Shen Jue looked at him. In the lamplight, Xiahou Lian's eyes curved with mirth; the flickering flames reflected in their dark depths were like golden fireflies. His grin was exaggerated, and his act was painfully obvious yet also…a little endearing somehow.

Shen Jue's lips quirked slightly. "No."

Xiahou Lian froze, taken aback—he hadn't expected Shen Jue to sabotage his ruse. Zhuxia brightened and was about to speak when Shen Jue continued, "You misremember. I always called you A-Lian. Plenty of people call you Xiao-Lian, but only I can call you A-Lian."

Xiahou Lian blinked, abruptly realizing that he still held Shen Jue's hand. He tried to pull away, but Shen Jue tightened his grip, refusing to let go. Flustered, Xiahou Lian found that their fingers had interlaced beneath the table. Shen Jue's hand was cold—a persistent symptom from a

childhood illness that no warmth could dispel. The chill of Shen Jue's grasp was piercing, and Xiahou Lian belatedly guessed that something was off.

Zhuxia forced a smile. "The chief truly cherishes old bonds. I didn't realize you two were so close."

"Close?" Shen Jue chuckled softly. "A-Lian's mother was wounded for my sake and later died suddenly. A-Lian himself has suffered countless injuries for me. What I owe him…I could never repay."

Zhuxia's voice wavered. "Why didn't you tell me earlier that there's such a rich history between you two, Xiahou-xiongdi? Please forgive your foolish sister-in-law's misunderstandings." Taking a seat beside Shen Jue, she added, "If you're the chief's benefactor, then naturally you're mine as well. Should you ever face difficulties, you need only ask for my help."

Xiahou Lian frowned at Shen Jue. "What nonsense are you spouting? My mother's death had nothing to do with you."

Shen Jue didn't answer. Xiahou Lian opened his mouth to press further, but then servants arrived with dishes and began to arrange them on the table. He fell silent, his hand still trapped in Shen Jue's. Subtly, he tried to wrench free, but Shen Jue refused to yield. Glancing over, he saw Shen Jue's lashes lowered, the candlelight casting shadows as delicate as moth wings beneath them, soft and strangely beautiful. Xiahou Lian couldn't decipher Shen Jue's expression; he could only leave it be.

Looking around, he felt a surge of irritation when he noticed Zhuxia sitting snuggled up to Shen Jue. "Don't you come from the palace, Sister-in-Law? How can you be so indecorous?"

Zhuxia startled. "What?"

Xiahou Lian sighed. "The chief must spoil you too much. Your place is to stand by and serve tea while I converse with him. Since when do wives sit at the table? Even in common households, women eat in the kitchen. How can you sit down here so boldly?"

Zhuxia stiffly rose, her teeth clenched in a forced smile. "You're right, dear brother. Completely right."

Shen Jue's lips twitched imperceptibly, and he finally released Xiahou Lian's hand, only to pick up his chopsticks and start serving food to

Xiahou Lian.

Zhuxia stood to one side, seething and grinding her teeth. This was supposed to be her evening sharing wine and watching the moon with Shen Jue. Yet instead, Xiahou Lian now occupied her seat while she remained on her feet, starving.

By the time the men finished eating, night had fully fallen. The moon hung round and luminous in the black sky, glowing faintly, like a delicate paper cutout lit from behind. Xiahou Lian shaded his eyes as he gazed up, thinking that the moon looked particularly large and round tonight—almost like Zhuxia's broad face.

An incense table was set up in the courtyard. A clay rabbit figurine sat in the middle of the tabletop, dressed in a red coat, the character for "fortune" embroidered on its chest. Its eyes curved cheerfully, radiating joy. Zhuxia trailed behind Shen Jue, preparing to bow before it at his side, only for Xiahou Lian to wedge himself between them.

"Sorry, sorry," he apologized without any remorse. "I'm just too tall. Step back a bit, Sister-in-Law."

Zhuxia was so furious that a snarl nearly twisted her face as what should have been a private moment between her and Shen Jue was again rudely interrupted by Xiahou Lian. Having observed the situation, Lianxiang discreetly placed an additional kneeling cushion below the incense table. Shen Jue noticed but didn't intervene, so he and Zhuxia knelt on either side with Xiahou Lian wedged squarely between them. Together, the trio lifted their incense sticks and bowed thrice.

After they rose, Zhuxia asked Shen Jue what wish he had made. Instead of answering, he countered, "What did *you* wish for?"

Blushing, Zhuxia lowered her head. "Your humble wife desires nothing for herself," she murmured, "And the chief—who was always destined for luxury—already has everything he could need. I prayed only for your safety and boundless happiness."

"Destined for luxury?" Xiahou Lian chuckled.

Hearing that, Zhuxia bristled, barely containing her irritation. "What does our esteemed brother have to say?"

“I always figured the chief was the type who’d spend nineteen years herding sheep out in the bitter cold,” Xiahou Lian quipped.

His words took everyone aback. Zhuxia covered her mouth, tittering. “You mean Su Wu?[9] How silly! No barbarian nation ever captured the chief, so what connection could there be? Your classical allusions are rather clumsy, Xiahou-xiongdi—though I suppose our chief shares Su Wu’s unyielding spirit, so the comparison just barely fits.”

Shen Jue turned his face toward the moonlit courtyard. Only he understood that Xiahou Lian wasn’t invoking Su Wu’s steadfast loyalty but a life as cold as winter and a heart as still as frozen water. Noting the hour, Shen Jue told Zhuxia, “It’s late. You should go rest. Shall I escort you?”

Zhuxia longed to stay, but his tone brooked no refusal. Shen Jue was already lifting a lantern to light her way, leaving her no choice but to follow. Xiahou Lian moved to join them, but Shen Jue motioned for him to remain.

They walked in silence, the attendants trailing far behind. The palace lantern swayed in Shen Jue’s hand, casting a small pool of light at their feet. Zhuxia’s heart raced—after so much waiting, they were finally alone. She deliberately slowed her steps, pleased when Shen Jue adjusted his pace to match. The covered walkway curved among the intricate shadows of leaves cast around them, and a small smile touched Zhuxia’s lips. In this moment, heaven and earth belonged to the two of them alone.

“Xiahou comes from humble origins and has an unruly temperament. I hope that you’ll indulge him,” Shen Jue remarked as they walked.

Zhuxia maintained her smile. “How could I possibly take offense at his words? He’s quite amusing, actually. I find him entertaining.”

“Oh?” Shen Jue chuckled. “Are you wearing the rouge I gave you before?”

Zhuxia nodded. “You have an excellent eye for color, Chief. This shade suits me perfectly.”

“Even a light touch enhances the beauty of a complexion like yours. I’ve heard that Persian kohl is exceptional—next time the foreign envoys bring tribute, I’ll see about acquiring some for you.”

Zhuxia smiled demurely. “No need to trouble yourself; your thoughtfulness alone is more than enough. Such luxuries are better reserved for Her Majesty. Copper-based kohl is sufficient for someone like me.”

When they reached the gate to Zhuxia’s courtyard, Shen Jue paused and handed the palace lantern to a maid. Zhuxia’s heart ached—how could the walk end so soon?

“Anything you use should be the finest. What does it matter if it’s usually meant for Her Majesty? You don’t doubt my ability to procure it, do you?” Shen Jue’s lips curved into a faint, fleeting smile lighter than a spring breeze, yet warmer than any smile she’d seen on his face.

Zhuxia had always adored Shen Jue—his beauty, his gentleness. In all the years she’d known him, she’d never witnessed his temper. He was courteous to all, measured in every interaction. She knew of his incapacity—she knew he hid his scars—but it was precisely that flaw that made her feel worthy of him.

As she gazed up at him, he inclined his head slightly, his porcelain features softened by that rare, tender smile. She dipped into a bow, bidding him farewell, then turned and drifted into the courtyard. After a few paces, she glanced back to find him still standing there watching her. He loved her—she knew it for certain now. Something collapsed in her heart with a thunderous roar, a sudden and devastating crash. She rushed back to him, frantic, as if afraid he might vanish.

As she gasped for breath, Shen Jue gently steadied her. “What is it?”

She lowered her voice to a whisper only he could hear. “Be wary of Wan Bohai, the new commander of the imperial guard.”

The ghost of a smile deepened on Shen Jue’s face. He waited until Zhuxia had entered her chambers and her lights had flickered on before turning away to head back to the main courtyard.

Chapter 70:
A Captivating Glance

SHEN JUE RETURNED TO FIND Xiahou Lian sitting on the threshold crafting lanterns. Dark crimson door panels stretched behind him, and grand red lanterns with swaying tassels hung overhead. In the soft interplay of light and shadow, Xiahou Lian was like a faint ink stroke. The delicate jingling of bells on the eaves drifted through the air in a long-lingering melody. Xiahou Lian looked up when he heard Shen Jue's footsteps, his usual gentle smile in place. The red-tinted light and the drifting chimes of the bells seemed to melt into a single glow and dissolve in the depths of Xiahou Lian's dark eyes.

Deeming the threshold too dirty, Shen Jue motioned for Xiahou Lian to move to the covered walkway to talk. Xiahou Lian carried his basin over and sat beside Shen Jue, picking up the reed strips once more to twist and weave them between his fingers. Shen Jue watched him assemble the lantern frame for a while before asking, "Why did you provoke Zhuxia?"

"She just bothers me," replied Xiahou Lian. "She's one of the empress dowager's servants, so you can't really do anything to her. And since you've got your status to consider, it's not like you can just toss snide comments at her here and there." He turned his head and grinned. "So I'll do it instead. I'm just a hooligan anyway; I don't have any manners. She can't do a thing to me, so she has no choice but to grin and bear it."

Shen Jue scoffed. "You think I need you to defend me?" he asked, his voice disdainful. "Since when do I require your help to vent my frustrations?"

Xiahou Lian lowered his head, his fingers tracing the reeds. "I'm not worried that you can't defend yourself; I'm worried about you being unhappy."

Shen Jue paused, then replied indifferently, "I'm used to it."

Xiahou Lian gazed at the roof beams for a moment, then suddenly said, "Back when I was still in the underworld, I had a few years of infamy.

Did you ever hear about that? My name—‘Wuminggui’—even made it into the *Garden Ghost Registry*.”

Shen Jue gave him a mildly contemptuous look. “Bored and reminiscing about your heroic past, are you?”

“Of course not,” Xiahou Lian muttered, exasperated. “Would I dare to show off in front of you? What I’m saying is that everyone thought I was untouchable back then. ‘Hengbo sweeps the jianghu.’ ‘One glance seals your fate.’ But it wasn’t true. Walk the night too long, and you meet ghosts. Those your blade killed on the battlefield return in your dreams to whisper your name. And then you can’t kill them, however many times you slash them.” He rubbed the arrow scar on his hand. “Back then, I got in the habit of sleeping with Hengbo in my arms. People said it was because I was vigilant, always ready for enemies at night, but that wasn’t it. The enemies I feared weren’t the ones who might come through the door but the ones who haunted my dreams.”

Despite being a man barely in his twenties—a former assassin, no less—Xiahou Lian always rambled on about ghosts and spirits like an old man. Shen Jue sighed but understood. He gripped Xiahou Lian’s wrist. “Don’t worry about that. You have a new face now, and even ghosts won’t be able to find you.”

“What I’m saying is, prestige may seem flashy, but it’s all for show,” Xiahou Lian continued slowly. “You don’t have to hide from me, Shaoye. If you’re unhappy, don’t bottle it up.”

Shen Jue finally grasped the meaning of Xiahou Lian’s roundabout speech; he was afraid of Shen Jue concealing his discontent. But “unhappy”? At this point, Shen Jue barely registered such feelings. Playing roles was second nature to him. It came to him effortlessly, and he’d long since mastered it. He could skillfully feign realistic sincerity or disguise malice as kindness. What did happiness or unhappiness matter so long as he achieved his goals? He frowned. “Stop meddling in what doesn’t concern you. Now that you’re safe, have you nothing better to do than fuss over others? I don’t need your concern.” He paused, then added, “Or your pity.”

Pride had always been Shen Jue’s armor—even if trampled in the mud, he’d straighten his back and stand tall. Xiahou Lian chuckled but

didn’t argue, only saying, “Then from now on, just try not to smile if you don’t have to, all right?”

“What? Do you find my smile ugly?” Shen Jue sneered.

“Not ugly,” Xiahou Lian replied. “You’re the most beautiful person of all, Shaoye—how could *you* ever be ugly? It just…hurts to look at.”

This wasn’t pity—it was heartache. Xiahou Lian tilted his head slightly, the corners of his eyes and brows softened by his faint, tranquil smile.

Shen Jue fell silent. The world around them hushed, the vast night shrinking until it seemed that only the two of them remained, facing one another.

No one knew Shen Jue better than he himself did. The higher he climbed, the more brutal the fall would be. Strip away the gilded bricks beneath his feet, and he was nothing. If he was not the exalted chief of the Eastern Depot revered by thousands, he would simply be a disheveled, reviled prisoner in shackles. He calculated every step he took carefully, made every move as if treading on thin ice. But who cared? Some sought to profit off him; others prayed for his downfall so that they could rise. But no one ever asked whether he was in pain; even Shen Jue himself had long since forgotten about that.

“Idiot,” he said.

“I pour my heart out to you, and you call me a name? There’s no justice in this world,” Xiahou Lian grumbled half-jokingly, lowering his head to resume work on a lantern. He’d finished weaving the frame; now he began layering oilpaper on it, producing another rabbit lantern. This one was larger and rounder with ears that stood tall like palm-leaf fans.

Shen Jue watched Xiahou Lian’s focused expression in silence. It was just a shoddy lantern, yet Xiahou Lian handled it as if he were carving jade; he didn’t even blink. He’d always been like this—pointlessly earnest. If children asked for lanterns, he would make them one after another. Yet this was the Xiahou Lian whom Shen Jue couldn’t let go of, the one he adored beyond reason. His gaze traced the lines of Xiahou Lian’s brows, lashes, and nose, the curve of his cheeks and jaw, drifting down until it reached his slender fingers as they pressed the parchment.

A demon stirred in Shen Jue's chest, whispering in his ear. *I don't want your heartache either, idiot,* Shen Jue thought. *What I want is* you. He lifted his hand; it hovered just over Xiahou Lian's shoulder. Xiahou Lian didn't react, absorbed as he was in applying a second layer of oiled parchment. Shen Jue's fingertips slowly pressed down, feeling the sharp edges of bone beneath fabric, the uneven ridges of old scars. His thumb brushed them lightly, secretly, a slow, searing stroke more intoxicating than any bold caress. Xiahou Lian was on the third layer of oiled parchment now. Shen Jue narrowed his eyes and leaned closer.

"All done!" Xiahou Lian announced suddenly, lifting the lantern and swaying it before Shen Jue. "Here—this one's for you."

Shen Jue withdrew slowly, eyeing the rabbit lantern in Xiahou Lian's hand. "I'm not a child."

"Everyone gets one. Kids and grown-ups alike." Xiahou Lian placed the lantern in Shen Jue's lap.

As Xiahou Lian's hand reached over, Shen Jue spotted a cut on his fingertip—a thin red line where the reed strips had sliced him. "You're hurt."

Xiahou Lian shrugged it off. "It's nothing."

Shen Jue removed his hand from behind Xiahou Lian's shoulder, his cool fingertips grazing the nape of Xiahou Lian's neck—a chilling touch—before sliding down to seize Xiahou Lian's wrist. In the next instant—before Xiahou Lian could react—Shen Jue took Xiahou Lian's fingertip between his lips.

Xiahou Lian's mind went blank, as if it had been blasted apart. He instinctively tried to pull his hand back, but Shen Jue tightened his grip, narrowing his eyes in warning before lowering his lashes again and lightly flicking his tongue over the tip of Xiahou Lian's finger. Warm, wet softness enveloped Xiahou Lian's skin. The tiny cut was acutely sensitive, and as he felt Shen Jue's tongue glide slickly over it again and again, tingles radiated up his finger in waves. He wanted to flee, but Shen Jue refused to let go, even grazing his teeth threateningly against the digit as if to say, *"Try to run and I'll bite it off."* The nip of his teeth emitted a scorching heat that crawled from Xiahou Lian's fingertip through his entire body.

What the hell is he doing?! Hoping to stop him, Xiahou Lian stammered, “Sh-Sh…Sh-Shaooo—!” His head spun, his words tangling until he bit his own tongue and finally choked out, “Shaoye!”

Shen Jue released him at last, his full lips parting from Xiahou Lian’s finger along with a fine, silvery strand of saliva. Xiahou Lian stared at the glistening thread still connecting his hand to Shen Jue’s mouth, his gaze locked as if rusted in place.

“What’s wrong?” Shen Jue blinked, feigning innocence. “You’re injured. Shouldn’t we treat the injury properly? What if you neglected it and died?”

Does he think I’m an idiot?! Xiahou Lian screamed internally. *If a mere scratch could kill me, how would I have survived this long?!*

“A guardsman from the Zi Unit once got nicked by a fishhook, developed a fever, and died within days,” Shen Jue continued, unbothered.

Did that really happen?! Xiahou Lian shot to his feet. He turned his back, not daring to face Shen Jue. “I-I’m heading home to rest. See you tomorrow!” He fled in such a hurry that he left the oilpaper and reed strips behind.

Smiling faintly, Shen Jue leaned against the porch pillar and watched Xiahou Lian practically stumble down the steps. When Xiahou Lian vanished past the corner gate, Shen Jue lowered his dark lashes and brushed his fingertips over his lips. His grin widened, unrestrained. Xiahou Lian’s finger had been sweet—so sweet. Shen Jue wanted…more.

Xiahou Lian rushed home, slammed the door shut, and leaned his back against it, staring down at the finger Shen Jue had licked. The saliva had long dried, but under the dim lamplight, he could still vividly feel the press of those lips against his skin, still see the faint bow of Shen Jue’s mouth, naturally flushed without a trace of rouge, pursed into a soft, deliberate line.

The sound of his own ragged breathing filled his ears. Belatedly, the heat in his blood surged; he didn’t need a mirror to know how flushed his face must be. He hurried to the well outside the kitchen, hauling up bucket after bucket of icy water to dump over himself. The cold shock tempered the fire in his body but did nothing to banish Shen Jue’s image from his

mind—the glistening dampness glazing his lips, or the heavy-lidded, teasing way he'd lifted his eyes.

Shen Jue was a goddamn yaojing! If he'd just wanted to tend Xiahou Lian's wound, why the hell did he need to *lick* it?! Xiahou Lian ran through several martial form drills, then the entire sequence of Qiye Garden swordplay techniques, until his limbs trembled with exhaustion. Only then did he drag himself back inside to sleep.

Life settled into a routine. Every morning, Xiahou Lian rose, scrubbed his teeth, rinsed his face, and reported to the yamen to endure his superiors' lectures; then he trailed Xu Ruoyu through the streets to investigate cases and sniff out leads. The Chen Unit had gone as far as pooling government funds to hire a gang of beggars as informants, and those beggars went around dredging up gossip like: "The minister of justice's eldest son is impotent, and his wife's child is actually his younger brother's" or "Landlord Zhang in the suburbs just had a twelfth daughter—still no son."

At first, Xiahou Lian was tasked with transcribing this drivel for the clerks at the archives, who scanned it for information worth passing on to Shen Jue. But after Xu Ruoyu saw Xiahou Lian's chicken-scratch handwriting and clumsy phrasing, he reassigned the task to a colleague named Bai.

An Eastern Depot agent's monthly pay was meager—just two taels of silver—but there were perks. Raiding an official's home during an investigation could line their pockets nicely. Once, the vice minister of rites' wife mysteriously drowned. Her family was connected to the empress dowager, who referred the case straight to the Eastern Depot, where it happened to fall under the Chen Unit's jurisdiction. Xu Ruoyu had led Xiahou Lian and a few others to investigate. The minister promptly presented the agents with a tray of gold ingots; Xu Ruoyu took three for himself and distributed the rest. It had been so long since Xiahou Lian held gold that he'd nearly teared up. He'd immediately treated the entire Chen Unit to a lavish feast at Zhu Tower, even booking the entire place and hiring courtesans and entertainers. Just like that, his newfound wealth vanished overnight.

Lately, peace had reigned, leaving the unit little to do. After their shifts, Xu Ruoyu often dragged Xiahou Lian to Yunxian Tower for drinks or to a brothel for music. At one point, Xiahou Lian casually asked Xu Ruoyu whether he knew of any agents who'd died of a fishhook wound. Xu Ruoyu confirmed that the story was true: The hook had been tainted, the man hadn't properly cleaned the wound, and a fever took him days later. Xiahou Lian supposed that Shen Jue had just been paranoid; after all, how could a splinter of reed be as risky as rusty fishing gear?

The next day, their superiors somehow caught wind of their evening revelry and fined the men three months' wages for carousing before the end of the national mourning period. Xu Ruoyu swore a blue streak; such indulgences were typically overlooked, so someone must've ratted them out.

With no other income, Xiahou Lian was forced to mooch daily meals from Lianxiang.

The following month, the emperor would be leaving the palace for a temple pilgrimage, and Xiahou Lian's workload exploded. An imperial excursion demanded flawless execution. The capital's guards doubled, and they were tasked with rounding up vagrants, jailing some and expelling others. Sometimes they simply loitered along the main roads, stopping anyone with a shifty look and demanding their travel permit and household registry, then extorting a few coins before letting them pass.

One morning, Shen Jue was having his carriage prepared at the estate gates for a palace visit. Behind it, Xiahou Lian and his unit stood guard, mounted on horseback.

In public, Shen Jue kept his distance. His authority over the Eastern Depot was absolute, his commands sharp, his demeanor unapproachable. He smiled often enough, but the arrogance of a man who commanded ten thousand households tended to keep others at bay, and none dared to speak without his leave. In private, however, he was far more casual. Lately, he'd even taken to slinging his arm around Xiahou Lian's shoulders. Xiahou Lian sometimes felt their dynamic resembled one of the taboo master-servant affairs in cheap novels, a thought that left him thoroughly mortified.

When Shen Jue stepped out of his residence, Shen Wenxing hurried over to the carriage with quick, small steps and placed a footstool on the

ground. Xiahou Lian and the rest of the agents clasped their hands in unison and respectfully called out, “Chief!”

As Shen Jue began to board the carriage, a boy of about eight or nine darted along the wall, wide-eyed and unblinking, clutching a handful of foxtail grass.

“You’re so handsome, Dagege!” the boy cried out. “Here, I’ve brought you flowers!”

One agent stopped him while the others stifled their laughter. “Hey little fella, that’s foxtail grass, not flowers!” another agent teased.

The child looked down at his hand and blinked in confusion before glancing back up at Shen Jue. “But that other brother told me these were flowers!” he said.

All of a sudden, Shen Jue commanded sharply, “Open his hand!”

The guards’ expression changed, and he quickly pried open the child’s clenched fist. Inside, a poisoned needle lay hidden among the foxtail grass, its tip glinting eerily blue in the sunlight. With a sudden shriek, the boy lunged recklessly toward Shen Jue. Xiahou Lian swiftly pulled Shen Jue back to shield him; another guard rushed forward and kicked the child to the ground. The child collapsed face-first and didn’t get back up. When the guards turned him over, they saw blood trickling from his mouth and eyes—he was already dead.

Another scream rang out: “Cong’er!” A woman dashed from an alleyway and threw herself over the child, wailing, “My Cong’er! How vile of you, Eunuch Shen! He was just a child! He only brushed you by accident, and for that, you took his life?!”

A crowd gradually gathered at the mouth of the alley, murmuring and pointing.

The woman wept hysterically, her hair disheveled. “Eunuch Shen, you cut down lives like grass! Give me back my child! Everyone, look! Come see! Shen Jue flouts the law right beneath the emperor’s nose to trample on us common folk! There’s no justice left! We got rid of one vile eunuch, that Wei De, only for this Eunuch Shen to take his place! There’s no way to survive!”

“Someone take this woman away!” Shen Jue ordered coldly.

The guards moved to drag her off, but she thrashed wildly, like a madwoman. Then, accidentally or not, someone shoved her—she staggered back, her head striking the stone lion at the entrance of the Shen residence. The impact killed her right away. In the blink of an eye, two corpses appeared lying at Shen Jue’s gate, their blood dripping onto the lion’s pedestal. The crowd erupted in shock and outrage.

Chapter 71:
Lost on a Forked Road

AFTER THREE DRUMBEATS, a bell tolled. The sound seemed to descend from the vast heavens, rippling over the imperial avenue in waves. The sky was still early-morning blue, and the waning moon hung thin and translucent in the east, the only patch of white in sight. At the sound of the bell, the Meridian Gate swung open. Two rows of officials emerged slowly from the side gates and began to ascend the grand steps to Taihe Hall.

Inside the hall, the Embroidered Uniform Guard stood in silent formation, their fierce flying-fish robes embroidered in vivid colors and their gilded, jewel-encrusted Xiuchun sabers[10] gleaming. Under their watchful gaze, the officials divided into two columns. The young emperor hadn't yet arrived—a common occurrence as the child sovereign was so young he often struggled to rise from bed. The officials could recall one instance when he'd refused to get up at all, leaving them waiting in the hall for half an hour before a eunuch hurried in to announce that court was canceled. Another time, they finally saw the emperor only when Shen Jue, the seal-holding head of the Directorate of Ceremonial, carried His Majesty into the hall on his back. Even then, the emperor didn't seem fully awake when he sat upon the throne.

Faint morning light spilled into the hall as the sky gradually brightened. At last, the vermilion side doors opened. Amid a cluster of eunuchs, a slightly stooped man led a child by the hand toward the throne. The boy wore a black gauze winged crown adorned with two dragons playing with a pearl, a yellow dragon robe loosely tied with a jade belt far too wide for his waist, and a pair of black imperial boots that peeked out from beneath his apricot-yellow hem. With the assistance of the man beside him, the young emperor climbed onto the throne, his feet dangling above the footrest. The man adjusted the emperor's robes with practiced ease before straightening again. His face was indistinct in the morning light, but his voice rang out as clear and crisp as the clink of a jade pendant.

"Kneel!"

The officials bowed their heads and dropped to their knees in unison. “Long live His Majesty!” they chanted. “May he live for ten thousand years! Ten thousand times ten thousand years!”

The roar of voices surged like a tide from Taihe Hall and across the entire Forbidden City. When the officials got back to their feet, they could finally look at the man standing beside the young emperor. His face was impassive beneath his black gauze cap, his striking features accentuated by the gold-embroidered pythons on his robes. This was the Great Qi dynasty’s most powerful eunuch; he oversaw the inner court and wielded authority that overshadowed any official’s.

With the ceremonial greetings concluded, Shen Jue announced in a clear voice, “Those with matters to present may speak! If there are none, court is dismissed.”

A voice rose from the back ranks in the hall: “Your Majesty, this subject has a matter to present!”

“Permission granted,” the young emperor replied.

A central drafting secretary stepped forward from the rear. “The seal-holding head of the Directorate of Ceremonial, Shen Jue, has committed murder in broad daylight,” he declared, his words biting and deliberate. “The bodies of a mother and son from the Yao family—owners of a medicinal herb shop in Mentougou—lie dead before the gates of the Shen residence. The child was no more than eight! Shen Jue’s cruelty is beyond reason; it has shocked the populace and stirred public outrage. We implore Your Majesty to pass judgment!”

An astonished murmur spread among the officials. Shen Jue’s power was immense—he controlled both the Eastern and Western Depots—and few dared oppose him. Normally, the deaths of two commoners with no special influence would have been swept under the rug without any issue—a bit of silver to console the family, a few bribes to the Ministry of Justice and the Court of Judicial Review, and the matter would have been forgotten. Yet this foolhardy man was dragging the affair into the imperial court.

The young emperor instinctively glanced at Shen Jue, but Shen Jue didn’t react, his lashes still lowered as if the accusation had nothing to do with him.

Clearing his throat, the emperor said, “This matter was already brought to my attention. Chief Shen submitted a memorial earlier, explaining in detail that the Yao mother and son were the instigators. The guards intervened, and in the ensuing scuffle, the two tragically lost their lives. It had nothing to do with the chief.”

The central drafting secretary refused to yield. “Those are Shen Jue’s words alone! Your Majesty’s unilateral decision risks the appearance of favoritism!”

Shen Jue wasn’t without supporters. The eunuch faction exchanged glances, gauging his reaction; then the commander-in-chief of the Embroidered Uniform Guard strode forward. “Minister Lu, you are mistaken. The Embroidered Uniform Guard investigated immediately after the incident. The coroner’s report showed no sign of struggle on either body. The fatal wound on Lady Yao’s head from her fall was her only injury, and the boy’s death was even more peculiar. He’d fallen prey to a poison called ‘Pine Branch on the Snow.’ So are you suggesting that Chief Shen somehow predicted that they would cause trouble and pre-emptively poisoned the child?”

The young emperor nodded in support.

Then the minister of the Court of Judicial Review stepped forward, his ceremonial tablet tucked under his arm. “According to the laws of Great Qi, Your Majesty, this case should be handed to the Ministry of Justice for investigation with our court conducting a review. The Embroidered Uniform Guard may have investigative authority, but their close ties to Chief Shen are suspect. Rumors have recently spread that the Embroidered Uniform Guard has been shielding him, provoking public discontent. In my humble opinion, this case should be transferred to the Ministry of Justice for retrial to clear Chief Shen’s name.”

Those of the eunuch faction stiffened. Though the minister of the Court of Judicial Review framed his words as concerned for Shen Jue, who knew what schemes might emerge once the case left the depot’s control? The central drafting secretary was clearly a mere vanguard; the real threat lay behind the scenes. This was an old officials’ trick: Send lower-ranking officials to launch an attack while the mastermind lurked in the shadows. The question was, who was pulling the strings?

The eunuch faction's eyes turned toward the chief grand secretary, but the old man simply held his tablet, eyelids drooping as if lost in meditation. From the glances they exchanged, the eunuchs seemed to realize it wasn't him.

The young emperor continued to look uncertainly at Shen Jue for guidance, but as if under a vow of silence, Shen Jue remained quiet and showed no intention of speaking. After a moment's hesitation, the emperor finally said, "In that case…"

The Embroidered Uniform Guard's commander-in-chief spoke again. "Your Majesty, all the investigation records are stored in the Embroidered Uniform Guard's office. Why go through the trouble of a retrial? Couldn't the Court of Judicial Review just send someone to review the documents? If necessary, the imperial prison can conduct another interrogation in the presence of court officials. Wouldn't that be more efficient?" As he spoke, he cast a sidelong glance at the minister of the Court of Judicial Review. "Or does the court suspect the Embroidered Uniform Guard is incompetent?"

"You misunderstand, Commander," the minister of the Court of Judicial Review retorted with a faint smile. "I am only thinking of Chief Shen's reputation. If he is truly innocent, why fear retrial by the Ministry of Justice?"

The two men went back and forth, neither willing to yield. The young emperor grew restless after sitting on the throne for so long and shifted uncomfortably. The officials below had begun to argue already, and while Great Qi's civil officials might have lacked physical strength, their words could crush a man to death. The emperor's ears ached from the noise, and he finally slapped the gilded screen beside him, shouting, "Enough, all of you! Silence!"

The imperial guards barked out a command, and the officials reluctantly fell quiet.

The young emperor turned to Shen Jue. "In the end, this matter pertains to you, Chief. Won't you say something? How should this be handled?"

The minister of the Court of Judicial Review opened his mouth to speak again, but Shen Jue slowly raised his eyes; the storm brewing in his

gaze forced the other man to swallow his words.

Lifting the hem of his robe, Shen Jue descended the white marble steps one by one. He removed his black gauze cap, knelt before the emperor, and pressed his head to the floor.

"'To eat the sovereign's rice is to serve the sovereign's affairs,'"[11] said Shen Jue. "As the seal-holding head of the Directorate of Ceremonial, it is my duty to share Your Majesty's burdens—yet instead, I have brought trouble to your court and forced Your Majesty to worry over this matter. For that, I deserve death ten thousand times over. Though these two deaths had nothing to do with me, my words alone cannot prove my innocence. If the Ministry of Justice can clear my name, I beg Your Majesty to transfer the case to the three judicial offices. I will remove my cap, retreat in reflection, and await judgment."

The young emperor panicked. "How could that be? If you resigned from your post, what would become of the palace affairs? In a few days, I am to offer incense at Guangling Temple, and it was you who handled all the arrangements, Chief. How could you just leave?"

The commander-in-chief of the Embroidered Uniform Guard stepped forward. "Perhaps Chief Shen can retain his duties for now. If the Ministry of Justice requires an interrogation, they may summon him at any time. That way, Your Majesty need not worry."

"Reasonable, very reasonable! Let it be so!" the emperor said happily.

Once court adjourned, Shen Jue escorted the young emperor back to his chambers. The eunuch faction gathered at the palace gate, hands tucked in their sleeves, and discussed countermeasures while they waited for Shen Jue. The opposition had come fiercely and unexpectedly, catching them off guard. As they sighed in frustration, they spotted a man approaching from the imperial avenue; he was bathed in radiant morning light, as if heaven itself favored him. When Shen Jue drew near, he raised a hand slightly, and those gathered fell silent, bowing and stepping aside. He boarded his carriage, and the onlookers watched him leave the palace. They exchanged uncertain glances, unsure of their next move.

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THE DAY OF THE INCENSE offering arrived in the blink of an eye. The imperial road had been cleared and barriers erected on either side. Commoners peered down from buildings, watching the long, dark procession below. Since the late emperor had passed away over the summer, this year's ceremony was far more modest than usual, but it still seemed extravagantly grand to the people. Phoenix sedans and dragon carriages rolled in front, led by the imperial retinue, who kept the path clear. Imperial troops provided an escort, and members of the Depots followed closely behind. Silks and brocades were piled high in a display of true imperial majesty.

The young emperor rode at the head of the procession, pressing his face against the carriage window to take in the sights, overjoyed to finally be outside the palace. The empress dowager's phoenix chariot followed behind the imperial dragon carriage; the empress dowager sat upright within and slowly counted her prayer beads, her face as elegant as ever. A headdress sat heavily on her head, the pearls and jade weighing down her jet-black hair and making her snow-white skin even more striking. Her lips were painted with glossy rouge, the results as delicate as a finely carved gem. At her side, Zhuxia attended her; when Shen Jue passed the chariot, the maid's eyes brightened as she bowed to him through the window.

Catching sight of Shen Jue, the empress dowager addressed him lightly. "How do you fare lately, Chief?"

"Your concern honors me, Your Majesty. I remain as I always have," answered Shen Jue.

"Yet I've heard that you're entangled in a lawsuit. Two lives were lost! I understand that the deceased's families are quite unruly and have been lurking outside the Eastern Depot for the past few days, wailing for justice. Is that true?"

Shen Jue smiled faintly. "It is. But His Majesty has already handed the case over to the Ministry of Justice for investigation. I trust it will be resolved soon."

Seeing his composure, the empress dowager frowned almost imperceptibly, yet her tone remained indifferent as she said in a casual tone, “The chief is a man of foresight. Such riffraff surely couldn’t drag you down.”

“May Your Majesty’s auspicious words prove true.” Shen Jue narrowed his eyes at the sunlight on the imperial road. “Though whether they *are* riffraff remains to be seen.”

“Oh? The chief’s words seem to carry hidden meaning.”

“Your Majesty gives me too much credit. I meant nothing beyond the obvious. In any case, this matter falls to the three judicial offices. I will submit to their judgment. I trust those esteemed ministers—they are wise and virtuous and would never wrong me.” Shen Jue bowed slightly and urged his horse forward.

The empress dowager watched him pull ahead and hummed cooly. The Shen Jue she knew would never truly submit. Steadying her expression, she whispered to Zhuxia, “Has the message reached Wan Bohai?”

Zhuxia nodded. “Everything has been arranged.”

“Good.” The empress dowager’s lips curved slowly. “The chief is formidable—the Yao mother and son alone won’t topple him, but he’ll never expect that I have another move prepared. Guangling Temple… We shall see.”

Zhuxia’s heart clenched. She bit her lip lightly. “Your Majesty…will you take his life?”

The empress dowager smiled and patted her hand. “No, silly child. Why would I kill him? I only mean to teach him a lesson, let him taste a bit of failure. Don’t worry, I’ll spare him—I would never make you a widow.”

Zhuxia nodded hesitantly.

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SHEN JUE WAS RIDING slowly ahead when Situ Jin caught up on horseback. “Chief,” he said, lowering his voice.

Shen Jue pressed his fingers to his temple. The weather had cooled, and he didn’t feel well. He turned his head slightly. “Xiahou Lian isn’t here, is he?”

“No. I told him the wrong date—he believes that today is a rest day, and that the incense offering is the day after tomorrow.”

“Good,” Shen Jue nodded. The filth of court affairs was no place for Xiahou Lian. He’d finally found some stability in his life, and Shen Jue refused to drag him back into chaos.

Situ Jin studied Shen Jue’s pallid face and said gravely, “Chief… please be careful.”

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XIAHOU LIAN WAS AT HOME, peeling garlic. The Eastern Depot had been in turmoil over the past few days. The Embroidered Uniform Guard was still investigating Shen Jue’s case, and the entire Yao clan had gathered their neighbors to carry the corpses to the Depot gates. There, they set up camp and clamored day and night, wailing and making a scene. It was baffling that they’d found the courage to challenge the Eastern Depot; worst of all, the matter had already reached the emperor’s ears, which kept the Eastern Depot from acting freely. They had no choice but to endure the disturbance.

Xiahou Lian’s instincts told him that this was no simple affair, but his low rank left him powerless to help Shen Jue. The Yao family’s racket had made it impossible for the office to function, so Xiahou Lian and his men hauled out several beds of nails from the prison cells and laid them outside the gates. With nowhere to lie or stand, the Yao family hurled curses over the wall, then finally retreated in frustration. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief—at least the crowd was gone.

After filling a small basket with peeled garlic, Xiahou Lian stood to head to the kitchen. Suddenly, the front door rattled; someone was pounding it urgently. Xiahou Lian quickly wiped his hands and opened the door to find Zhu Shunzi leaning against the wall, panting heavily.

"What—"

Before Xiahou Lian could finish, Zhu Shunzi grabbed his arm and pulled him outside. "You—! Today is the emperor's incense offering at Guangling Temple, and you're actually skipping out on your duties?! Fine, try and skip if you must—but your squad leader caught wind of it! Luckily for you, he's a kind man and didn't report you—he just sent me to fetch you back to the team. Hurry, hurry! If we leave now, we might still catch up!"

"What the hell?" Xiahou Lian frowned but ducked back inside to change into his uniform and grab his goose-quill saber. "Isn't the offering the day after tomorrow?"

"No!" Zhu Shunzi yelled. "You must've been dozing off when the orders came down. It's today!"

There was no time to argue. The pair mounted their horses and raced toward Guangling Temple, following the ancient path until they reached the foot of the mountain. There, they dismounted and began to ascend the stone steps. A chilly mountain wind whistled through the old locust trees, loudly rustling their leaves. The temple steps seemed endless—from above, they must have looked like ants crawling upward.

Xiahou Lian grew increasingly uneasy as they climbed. The Embroidered Uniform Guard and imperial troops should have been guarding the emperor's procession along the way. Why wasn't anyone there?

He turned to ask Zhu Shunzi, but his companion looked equally bewildered.

Voices drifted from the woods. Zhu Shunzi moved to investigate, but Xiahou Lian yanked him back, pressing a finger to his lips in warning.

Crouching low, Xiahou Lian crept forward like a silent snake through the tall grass that reached his thighs. He edged up to a locust tree and peered around its trunk to observe the scene ahead.

Five imperial guardsmen were gathered there. One had wandered a short distance away and stood just five paces from Xiahou Lian, untying his sweat-soaked waist sash to relieve himself in the grass. The other four sat on the ground, resting. A narrow-eyed man pulled from his armor a string of tourmaline beads adorned with hanging tassels and a lapis lazuli Buddha-head finial that glinted in the sunlight. Blood speckled the beads, and the man wiped them carefully on his sleeve as he asked, “Hey, Boss—how much d’you think these’ll sell for?”

“How the hell should I know? Take them to Liulichang—you’ll get a good price!” The man he’d called “Boss” picked his teeth. “Too bad we only got his hand, not the man himself—that bounty would’ve set us up for life!”

Another man chuckled darkly. “Goddamn. Did you see his face? Pretty as a painting! They say palace eunuchs are elegant, but I never expected him to look like a fucking celestial beauty.”

The man relieving himself in the distance called back loudly, “Just treat him like a woman! Who cares whether he’s missing a part or two? If only we could’ve had some fun with him—now, that would’ve made life worth living!”

As the words left his mouth, a flash of cold steel cut across the men’s vision like a blade slicing their eyelids. They all flinched in alarm. Ten paces ahead, locust leaves scattered as their urinating comrade stumbled backward with a bloodcurdling scream. He yanked up his unfastened pants with one hand, clutching the other to the side of his face. Fresh blood gushed from his mouth with every step, dripping onto the leaves below in a garish, vivid red.

The thing forcing him back was a goose-quill saber, its blade buried deep in his mouth. Blood seeped from the corners of his lips into the silver fuller. Step by step, he retreated until the figure hidden behind the leaves finally emerged. It was a man in a black pleated garment; he gripped the saber in one hand, his pitch-black eyes terrifying under the dappled sunlight. The guardsmen scrambled to their feet and drew their blades.

“Tell me where the chief is if you want to live,” the man with the saber said, his voice icy. He flicked his wrist sharply, and his goose-quill

saber tore through their comrade’s mouth, splicing his jaw clean open. “Or end up like him.”

Chapter 72:
Chilling Bloodthirst

"WHO WANTS TO DIE?"

"It's one of those eunuch's dogs from the Eastern Depot! Chop him to pieces!"

Xiahou Lian said nothing. Slowly, deliberately, he sheathed his goose-quill saber. The golden blade disappeared into its scabbard with a soft rasp. He shifted, gripping the saber's hilt as he dropped into a crouch. The air around him changed, growing sharp as the cutting edge of late autumn. Beneath his netted headband, Xiahou Lian's eyes glinted like a lone wolf's.

The guards' boss sneered. "What? Scared now?"

The narrow-eyed man laughed. "Ha! Not just a eunuch's dog, but a cowardly one! You're a damn sight worse than your colleagues, but your timing is perfect—ha! I've rested enough. Let's carve up another eunuch's mutt and go claim our reward!"

"You hurt my chief?" Xiahou Lian asked, his voice icy.

"I cut his fucking hand off!" The narrow-eyed man stuffed the tourmaline beads into his armor, grinning triumphantly.

"You cut it off?" Xiahou Lian's eyes darkened impossibly, his gaze growing even more terrifying.

The look sent a shiver down the narrow-eyed man's spine. The figure before him seemed less like a man than a demon that had crawled out of a mountain of corpses. Still, there were four of them and only one of him! Gritting his teeth, the guard forced a vicious smirk. "That dead eunuch's beads are in my hand—what do you think?"

Xiahou Lian took a slow, frigid breath, eyes churning with fury. He was going to kill them—kill every last one of them!

The narrow-eyed man charged first, and the others followed, roaring. Cold steel flashed across Xiahou Lian's face, producing a single blinding

streak of light. Yet Xiahou Lian was remained still, rooted in place, his grip on his saber unyielding as he locked on to the narrow-eyed man's blade. That man finally reached him, swinging his saber down in a brutal overhead slash—but in that instant, Xiahou Lian moved.

A golden arc of light burst from the scabbard, scattering flecks of brilliance like shattered gold through the air. It was an iaijutsu draw, so fast that it carried the force of a thunderbolt, and it howled as it met the narrow-eyed man's saber. With an ear-splitting metallic shriek, the man's blade snapped cleanly in half.

He didn't even have time to register his shock before Xiahou Lian reversed his slash, the edge of his blade slicing through the man's neck as easily as if he'd cut through a leek. The narrow-eyed man's head flew off, a fountain of blood spraying behind it.

The men behind him froze mid-step, gazes locked on to the collapsing headless corpse, its neck stump so smooth it looked polished. Then they looked through the crimson mist at their attacker's dark and brutal eyes, as vicious as a demon's.

Xiahou Lian didn't give them time to react. His goose-quill saber shimmered like rippling water under the sun as he stepped over the narrow-eyed man's corpse. In the guards' hands, his weapon was nothing special—but in Xiahou Lian's grip, it was a tiger's fang.

They clashed. Xiahou Lian smashed the boss's mouth with the saber's spine, channeling every ounce of his strength into the blow. The man's lips split instantly, and teeth and blood sprayed everywhere. When a blade came from behind, Xiahou Lian didn't turn. Instead, he twisted his saber backward, thrusting at an unnatural angle to pierce his attacker's arm, then flicking his blade upward to sever the tendons. The man screamed and crumpled clutching his ruined arm.

The last man decided to run, so Xiahou Lian drew the triple-bolt hand crossbow from his waist and fired without hesitation, burying three bolts in the fleeing man's back. The guard dropped like a stone. In the span of a few breaths, three men had died, and two had been incapacitated. Blood spread, staining the yellowed locust leaves beneath them. There was a terrifying, breathtaking beauty to it.

Zhu Shunzi crept from behind a tree, staring at Xiahou Lian in horror. He never imagined that easygoing, good-natured Xiahou Lian could kill with such brutality. He recalled running into Xiahou Lian once at the market and watching him haggle clumsily over meat, then finally give up and pay full price. He'd thought that Xiahou Lian was just like him—another slacker drifting aimlessly through the capital. But this slacker had just slaughtered a group of men without blinking.

Xiahou Lian planted his foot on the boss's chest and pressed down. The man gasped, choking as he writhed. "Where did you see the chief?"

"In the woods—five hundred paces in!" the boss hastily replied.

"And who ordered you to kill him?"

"Commander Wan! He's our commanding officer! He ordered us to kill anyone from the Eastern Depot, including Shen Jue, on sight!" The guards' leader wailed incessantly, though his cries were muffled. His split lips made every word excruciating. "It wasn't my idea! Spare me, I beg you!"

"Why does this Wan bastard want the chief dead?" Xiahou Lian pressed.

"I don't know! I'm just a foot soldier—we follow orders!" the boss sobbed.

Xiahou Lian pressed his saber tip against the man's sternum. "You're not lying?"

The boss shook his head frantically, snot and tears smeared across his face.

"Good."

For a brief moment, the boss believed Xiahou Lian had spared him—then the goose-quill saber plunged into his chest. Blood gushed from his heart and bloomed like a macabre flower across his tunic. His face froze in shock.

Zhu Shunzi suddenly pointed. "X-Xiahou! That one's escaping!"

Xiahou Lian turned. The last surviving guardsman fled desperately into the trees, clutching his wounded arm. Picking up a fallen blade, Xiahou Lian hurled it after him with full force. The straight, slender sword spun

like a golden disc through the air, then fully impaled the man, pinning him to a tree.

Zhu Shunzi crouched on the ground, his face twisted in distress. “Xiahou…was our chief set up? Why do we keep running into this shit? I never should’ve called you here—and I shouldn’t have come either!”

“Guangling Temple is a killing field now,” said Xiahou Lian. “Who knows how many imperial guardsmen that Wan bastard sent? The mountains aren’t safe—you should go back.” He retrieved the tourmaline beads from the narrow-eyed man’s armor and pocketed them, then grabbed the leader’s two-foot dagger and hung it from his own belt.

Zhu Shunzi hesitated. “How about we both leave? The chief… Well, everyone’s got their own fate. We work for the Depot, but it isn’t worth dying over.”

“No.” Xiahou Lian checked his weapons. “I failed him before—I won’t fail him this time. Go. We’ll meet again.” Without another word, he strode into the woods.

Zhu Shunzi stared after him. Xiahou Lian moved like a lone wolf—the forest was a death trap swarming with imperial guard hounds, yet he walked right in without hesitation. As long as he had his bloodthirsty fangs, it seemed no danger could deter him. *What an idiot.*

Zhu Shunzi sniffled, then fled in the opposite direction.

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XIAHOU LIAN’S HEART burned with urgency. Shen Jue was hurt—badly. Without treatment, he could die. Refusing to entertain the thought, Xiahou Lian ran, scanning for any trace, any clue. He scaled a tree, perching at its crown to survey the land. The temple grounds were a sea of trees, their yellowed leaves churning in waves under the wind. In the distance, a cliff cut across the horizon, its face carved with Buddhist reliefs.

Eight hundred paces out, Xiahou Lian spotted a squad. He gripped a branch and swung forward, his black figure flitting like a sparrowhawk

through the canopy in a display of agility that would have stunned any onlooker. Years of scrambling through the Garden's mountains as an assassin had honed his strength beyond an ordinary man's. As the guardsmen came into focus, Xiahou Lian soundlessly climbed an old locust tree and hung upside down within the dense foliage, only his dark eyes visible through the leaves. Had anyone looked up, they would've been met with the blood-chilling sight of an assassin hanging bat-like in silence, watching like a specter awaiting its prey.

One of the guards crouched, tracing marks on a tree trunk. "The eunuch went north. We took the wrong path!"

Another voice responded, "Wasn't he heading south earlier?"

"The markers have changed," the first guard said. "See? The thick end points north now, and the thin end points south. That damned eunuch is lost—north leads to a dead end at the cliffs."

A shadow fell over him, but he barely noticed it until a voice above asked, "What markers? What are you looking at?"

"These ones. Didn't Commander Wan say to follow them?" As he asked this question, he suddenly grew tongue-tied and whirled around, drawing his blade.

That voice hadn't been from his squad!

Just then, his saber was knocked from his hand, and a dagger pinned his shoulder to the tree. He screamed, then froze in horror—his comrades lay dead all around him, corpses stiff, mouths agape in silent terror. This attacker had slit their throats from behind, without a sound, like a ghost.

Now it was his turn.

The stranger leaned down. "These markers. Explain them." he spat out each word, gritting his teeth.

"I-I don't know! Commander Wan said to follow the markers to find Shen Jue and his bastard eunuchs—I mean, the Eastern Depot men!"

"How many Depot agents are in these mountains?"

"I'm not sure… They scattered. We killed a few, but most of them are still hiding."

Xiahou Lian crouched and patted his cheek. “And how do you know you’ll track down the chief with these markers, not his agents?”

“I…I’m guessing!” the man stammered. “But some of the lines on the markers are thicker than others.”

“What else do you know?”

The guard looked at him blankly and shook his head.

“Lying will get you killed,” Xiahou Lian said coldly.

“I’m not lying, I swear!”

Xiahou Lian yanked the dagger free and slit the man’s throat. Blood sprayed, streaking his face. “But I am. Sorry—the truth won’t save you either.”

Xiahou Lian stood, seething. Shen Jue wasn’t just wounded—he’d had a traitor leading him astray. He punched the tree, wishing he could slaughter every imperial guard on the mountain. Just then, footsteps crunched behind him. Xiahou Lian turned to see a squad of ten imperial guards standing there, their chain mail and sabers glinting coldly amid the falling leaves.

“Friend or foe?” one guard asked warily.

Another spotted the corpses. “He’s the eunuch’s hound!”

Xiahou Lian’s grip on his saber tightened, his knuckles cracking. He licked his teeth and slowly unsheathed his blade. The autumn wind howled, leaves fluttering down like dying butterflies. As the guards charged, the lone assassin stood surrounded by death. He raised his sword, his wolfish eyes now visible under his hair, his bloodlust towering like a mountain.

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A SCOUT STUMBLED INTO CAMP. “Reporting a madman from the Eastern Depot—he’s slashing and killing anyone he sees! We…we’ve already lost eight squads to him! Only a few men from three other squads managed to escape, every one of them injured!”

This camp was sparsely furnished. Two rows of round-backed chairs lined the ground, and a grand seat stood at the center beside a small tea table; there wasn't any other furniture. The empress dowager sat upright in that grand seat, her eyes lightly closed, the honey-colored prayer beads in her hand clicking softly. When the scout frantically rushed in, she opened one eye briefly, then closed it again. The forces' commander, Wan Bohai, was standing up, while an attendant—the empress dowager's personal maid, Zhuxia—was kneeling.

"What nobody could possibly warrant such alarm?" Wan Bohai snapped.

The scout bowed low on the ground to the empress dowager, then turned to the commander. "Commander, you should see the state of the survivors!" he cried. "Some are missing arms—others have lost legs! We killed a few of the agents elsewhere, but every last one of us fell to that madman!"

Wan Bohai frowned. "Since when does someone so terrifying belong to the Eastern Depot? Go reorganize the squads into twenty men each. Search along the mountain paths. I refuse to believe this lunatic can hold off twenty men at once!"

Zhuxia stroked the empress dowager's feet and wept. "Your Majesty, please spare the Depot Chief. Let him live—your servant promises that he won't dare oppose you again! Banish him to Jinling, forbid him from ever returning to the capital, but I beg you to spare his life!"

"Silly girl. Shen Jue is no ordinary man—give him a drop of water, and the rivers and seas will churn! How could I possibly let him live?" The empress dowager sighed, tucking her feet under her skirts and smoothing them. "Abandon this foolish hope! You once swore to serve me for life, yet now you're bewitched by a man—a eunuch, no less! How disappointing!" She turned to Wan Bohai. "I'm not sure that twenty men will be enough. That lunatic is no ordinary foe—your guardsmen must be cautious!"

"No ordinary foe?" Wan Bohai scoffed. "What is he, some kind of god?"

"No, not a god—a demon from hell." The empress dowager stroked her prayer beads. "Go! Send more men. Both Eunuch Shen and that madman must die!"

Chapter 73:
A Body Like a Blade

SHEN JUE RAN THROUGH THE FOREST flanked by thirteen Eastern Depot agents; he'd originally brought twenty, but seven had died in earlier skirmishes. More were wounded. His remaining forces were dwindling. Meanwhile, at least five hundred imperial guards were hunting him across the mountain. Shen Jue was injured as well; his right forearm had taken a slash during an ambush on the mountain path, drenching his hand in blood. Only his exceptional pain tolerance had kept him from dropping Jingtie as he blocked the guard's near-fatal strike.

But he hadn't accounted for falling ill. The mountain wind was too strong; it made his head throb. Chills surged through his body, and though he was sweating, his limbs felt as if they'd been submerged in ice water. Dizziness clouded his mind, and infirmity slowed his reflexes. In several skirmishes, he'd actually felt his strength failing. *Just hold on a little longer,* he told himself.

If he lasted until tomorrow, this ordeal would be over and he could return to the Eastern Depot. Xiahou Lian would be on duty under the sun, and Shen Jue could casually stroll over and exchange a few words with him as usual. Shen Jue had always kept secrets flawlessly, so Xiahou Lian would never know of the dangers he'd faced today nor notice the wound on his arm. He might realize that Shen Jue was sick, but that would be inconsequential. Shen Jue could nonchalantly invite him over for a meal and ask what he'd done that day. Xiahou Lian would surely answer with a smile, sunlight spilling over his face, his grin brighter than the rays themselves.

Shen Jue recalled how Xiahou Lian looked in his pleated garments—he'd cut a subdued figure in plain black hemp, but gold-threaded embroidery had lent him a noble air, and the embroidered qilin added a touch of ferocity. His tall, straight-backed frame always drew glances; maids stole looks at wherever he stood.

Xiahou Lian. Xiahou Lian.

Shen Jue gritted his teeth and kept running, As the wind whipped leaves against his face, he forgot both his pain and exhaustion.

But slowly, faint shouts rose behind them. The imperial guards had found them again and were giving chase like rabid dogs. There had to be a traitor in his ranks—otherwise, the guards could never have located them so quickly. But Shen Jue had no time to think nor to investigate—he had to reach the cliff.

“Chief!” Xu Ruoyu called in barely suppressed panic.

“No talking! Run!” Shen Jue ordered.

They quickened their pace, darting through the trees, dry leaves crunching underfoot as a desolate wind howled around them. The shouting behind them drew closer. Shen Jue glanced back and caught the glint of enemy blades stained with fresh blood. Two of the agents in the rear were cut down. “Chief, run!” they screamed as they fell, their backs splattered with blood.

“Chief!” Xu Ruoyu roared. “They’re catching up!”

Shen Jue ignored him and kept sprinting forward. The trees thinned, and the mountain wind grew fiercer. Once he’d raced ahead several hundred more paces, the view suddenly opened. They had left the forest; daylight shone directly overhead. But the path abruptly ended at a sheer cliff’s edge.

“Damn it! we took the wrong path! This is Wanfo Cliff!” someone cried in horror.

Wanfo Cliff—the cliff of a thousand Buddhas. Shen Jue stepped to the edge and looked down. A deep pool lay below, reflecting the shifting clouds and sky, its waters the pale green of duck eggs. Steep cliffs and patches of yellow-green shrubs surrounded the pool, the mountain breeze stirring delicate ripples across its surface. Faintly visible at the base of the cliff were countless Buddha statues, some seated, others reclining—ancient rock carvings etched into the stone.

He turned back. The imperial guards had reached the cliff already. They licked their lips as they slowly advanced like fanged beasts thirsty for blood, eyes gleaming with murderous intent. The surviving Eastern Depot guards formed a line between Shen Jue and the guardsmen, their goose-

quill sabers glinting in the sunlight and casting wavering reflections on the ground.

The guards' captain grinned viciously. "There's nowhere left to run, Eunuch Shen!"

Shen Jue stared coldly at him and said nothing.

"Why don't you kneel and call me 'Daddy'?" the officer taunted. "Maybe then I'll leave your corpse intact!"

Letting out a low, mocking laugh, Shen Jue took another step back, his heel grinding against loose stones. He could hear the faint clatter of pebbles as they tumbled over the cliff edge.

"Captain, why waste words on him?" another guardsman sneered. "This castrated dog has slaughtered countless loyal men, oppressed our people, and committed no end of atrocities! He wouldn't sway me even if he did call me 'Daddy'!" The guard suddenly chuckled. "Though I might be willing…if he got down on his knees and served me!"

"Shut your filthy mouth!" an Eastern Depot agent roared in fury. "Brothers, fight them to the death!"

With battle cries, the agents rallied; they charged the imperial guards with their blades raised. But suddenly searing pain erupted over Shen Jue's back, as if flames were licking his spine. He heard the nauseating sound of steel piercing flesh and watched a gleaming blade tip burst from his chest. His eyes widened in shock. Gritting his teeth against the agony scorching his ribs, he stubbornly turned his head.

Xu Ruoyu's blood-smeared face filled his vision. Then his companion yanked the blade from his chest, and Shen Jue collapsed to the ground, his eyes still wide open but gradually dimming. At that moment, several more "guards" suddenly turned on their comrades, slashing at their backs. The unprepared loyalists fell one after another until at last the traitors turned, blades in hand, to face Shen Jue on the cliff.

"Forgive me, Chief," Xu Ruoyu said quietly.

Shen Jue's forces had been completely annihilated. Only these four traitors remained standing among the corpses.

The captain threw back his head and laughed. “Never expected your own men to betray you, did you, Eunuch Shen? Face it—there’s no way out now.”

Shen Jue’s gaze was as cold as a handful of snow. “I treated you well, Xu Ruoyu. I knew there were spies in the Eastern Depot, but I never thought the traitor was among those I most trusted.”

“I had no choice, Chief,” Xu Ruoyu replied.

“Did the empress dowager mobilize all her spies for today’s ambush?” Shen Jue’s smile held no warmth.

“Yes. The imperial guards will hunt down and slaughter every last Eastern Depot agent in these mountains. Today’s trap is your end.”

Shen Jue chuckled darkly. “To commit such slaughter under the Buddha’s gaze… It’s truly worthy of Her Majesty. But to kill the head of the Directorate of Ceremonial, he must be properly charged. What is my crime?”

“Conspiring to commit treason with rebels from Qiye Garden!” Xu Ruoyu sighed, shaking his head in mock regret. “Chief, you really shouldn’t have kept that man… He became your fatal weakness.”

Shen Jue continued to back away, his expression unreadable. “Is that so?” His heel touched the edge of the cliff. He glanced from the corner of his eye at the deep pool below and took a slow, heavy breath.

He had prepared for this long ago. At the bottom of the cliff, a corpse awaited, dressed in clothes identical to his—and a drowned body’s face swelled beyond recognition.

Having foreseen this assassination attempt, Shen Jue had played along to purge the traitors. Only by walking into the tiger’s den could he provoke the Eastern Depot’s spies to reveal themselves. And, in the end, a staged falling death would set him free.

His plan was proceeding flawlessly. He tightened his grip on Jingtie, preparing to leap from the cliff.

“I lured him into the mountains,” Xu Ruoyu continued. “It’ll be far more convincing if you and the Garden rebels die together. Her Majesty also needs his Zhaoye as evidence. He came here alone, and he’s probably

already dead, since the entire mountain is swarming with imperial guards." He smiled at Shen Jue. "But don't grieve too much, Chief. After all, you'll join him soon enough. If you hurry on the road to the underworld, you may even catch up to him!"

Shen Jue's steps faltered as he retreated, and an icy shock suddenly gripped him.

"What did you say…?" *Xiahou Lian entered the mountains?*

Shen Jue's heart clenched violently, and his vision darkened. Every carefully laid plan crumbled in that instant. *No… Impossible.* Xiahou Lian was strong, a named assassin in the *Garden Ghost Registry*, the man who'd killed even Shixin. He couldn't die so easily. Shen Jue had to find him. He had to save him. Shen Jue gritted his teeth, ceased to retreat, and drew Jingtie. Black as night, the blade slid from its sheath, reflecting his frigid gaze.

"Planning to resist?" asked Xu Ruoyu. "You have no one left, Chief."

Xu Ruoyu and the imperial guards closed in slowly, their blades weaving a net of cold, deadly light.

Shen Jue steadied his breathing. There were twenty-four foes, but the imperial guards' swordplay was mediocre; most relied on brute force. Xu Ruoyu and the three traitorous agents were more skilled, though. At his peak, Shen Jue could have cut them down without difficulty—but right now he was sick. His head throbbed, the sunlight searing his eyes. Just keeping them open was a struggle. But he couldn't retreat—absolutely not. Shen Jue exhaled, then opened his eyes, suddenly emanating killing intent as cutting as frost.

Xu Ruoyu crouched slightly, adopting a guarded stance, and smiled faintly. "After you, Chief!"

An autumn gust swirled dead leaves through the sunlight, their edges sharp as dancing blades. The air thickened with silent menace. Every man present was a predator poised to strike. Xu Ruoyu roared and lunged forward, saber raised—when a hoarse voice came from the forest.

"Hold it. Who says he has no one left?"

The voice wasn’t loud, but it was slow, deliberate, and singularly clear. Everyone heard. The guardsmen froze, and Xu Ruoyu whirled around in shock. Did Shen Jue have reinforcements after all?

From the depths of the wild grass and dense foliage, a blood-drenched figure emerged. His hair had come loose, the black strands clinging to his shoulders and his bangs partially obscuring his eyes. He held a gleaming blade in each hand, their tips dripping fresh blood. His every step left a crimson footprint on the ground.

This couldn’t quite be called a man—it was more like a blood-soaked demon that had clawed its way out of hell. As the demon drew closer, the guardsmen recoiled from the overwhelming stench of the gore that drenched him head to toe. Even his hair dripped red. It was impossible to tell his blood from the blood of his victims. With each step he took, the guards instinctively retreated.

But their captain burst into laughter when he saw that only one man was approaching. “And here I thought that reinforcements had arrived! It’s just some mud-covered monkey—”

Before he could finish, the bloodied man raised his arm and fired a crossbow bolt. A cold flash pierced the captain’s gaping mouth and erupted from the back of his neck. The captain collapsed, blood gushing from his throat.

“It’s him!” someone cried. “That madman!”

“What madman?” Xu Ruoyu tightened his grip on his goose-quill saber.

“The madman who kills everyone on sight!” a guard answered. “He’s already slaughtered so many of us!”

The madman continued his advance, and the crowd instinctively parted, pointing their blades at him but not daring to strike. He moved step by step toward Shen Jue, who stood at the cliff’s edge, his dark eyes widening as they reflected the blood-drenched figure.

“Xia… Xiahou Lian,” Shen Jue breathed.

Finally, Xiahou Lian reached him. He took Shen Jue’s injured right hand and examined it briefly. Then the mouth of his blood-streaked face

lifted into a grin, his teeth white against all the crimson. Even beneath the gore, his smile was as warm as the sun.

“Hello, Shaoye. I’m here to save you.”

Shen Jue’s eyes reddened. He seized Xiahou Lian’s shoulders, immediately coating his hands in blood. “You…you idiot! How did you end up like this?!”

“Don’t worry—it’s nothing.”

Shen Jue steadied himself. “Jump off the cliff with me,” he whispered. “Now.”

Xiahou Lian paused, then turned. “No.”

“Xiahou Lian!”

“Don’t worry, Shaoye.” Xiahou Lian crossed his blades before his chest, a flash of golden light skimming the steel like a crescent moon. “All who dared to humiliate you, all who betrayed you…” He clenched his teeth; each of his words was carved from bone-deep fury. “I, Xiahou Lian, will slaughter every last one of them!”

Chapter 74:
Unstoppable

A BATTLE ERUPTED AT ONCE. The guardsmen charged first, rushing past the four traitors toward the cliff.

"Give me Jingtie—and stay behind me!" Xiahou Lian roared.

Shen Jue didn't hesitate. As the men pivoted past each other, Jingtie and Xiahou Lian's goose-quill saber arced through the air—in the space of a breath, they'd exchanged weapons. Jingtie's icy hilt and guard sent a jolt through Xiahou Lian's nerves as it settled into his grip. It had been so long since he'd held this blade, and it felt like reuniting with an old friend. As his fingers tightened, he almost felt the sword's deep, powerful heartbeat.

The enemy's howls filled his ears as the tide of bodies crashed toward him. Holding Jingtie in his right hand and a short blade in his left, Xiahou Lian crouched slightly, then exploded forward like a tiger leaping into battle. The sounds of tearing flesh and splintering bone filled the air, ribs and limbs snapping like reeds under Jingtie's edge. This blade was unlike any other. It had been forged from Western high-carbon steel, tempered again and again until common iron shattered beneath it like brittle bamboo. It required neither blinding speed nor brute strength to cleave through other blades. Xiahou Lian remembered Shixin's words when he first placed Jingtie in Xiahou Lian's hands: *"This blade carries a wrath profound enough to sever all creation."*

With Jingtie in his hand, Xiahou Lian was unstoppable. The swarm of enemies parted before him, a gap torn wide in moments. He advanced through the spray of blood, blade flashing, slicing through two goose-quill sabers in a single stroke before closing them like scissors across their owners' throats. He spun, weaving a storm of steel around him. Shen Jue barely needed to lift his own weapon; Xiahou Lian shredded every foe who reached them before he could strike. All he had to do was stay close behind Xiahou Lian and cut down the few who slipped through.

Xu Ruoyu's brow furrowed as the body count rose at Shen Jue and Xiahou Lian's hands—their numbers were dwindling fast. He stopped

hesitating and lunged into the fray himself, dodging through the chaos to confront Shen Jue directly. Shen Jue's gaze went glacial, and his goose-quill saber traced a frigid arc through the air as it swept upward from below.

This was the Qiye Garden's Saber Art, Swallow's Swoop. It was the saber technique Xiahou Lian had taught him so many years ago. Though the strike would be enough to gut Xu Ruoyu, he didn't dodge. Instead, he lunged forward recklessly. Shen Jue soon understood why: The moment his goose-quill saber struck Xu Ruoyu's torso, it rebounded with a violent tremor. Beneath his clothes, Xu Ruoyu was wearing chain mail the blade couldn't pierce. Shen Jue didn't panic, swiftly sidestepping to evade Xu Ruoyu's descending slash.

Then a bolt of black lightning flashed past Xu Ruoyu's knees, and his airborne body jerked mid-motion before crashing heavily to the ground. As he fell, the white gleam of severed bone peeked through the flesh of his ruined knees—during Xu Ruoyu's split-second leap, Jingtie had cleanly bisected his legs.

Xiahou Lian bared his teeth at Xu Ruoyu in a vicious smile, radiating murderous intent. "Hey. *I'm* your opponent."

Xiahou Lian moved to finish the job, but the remaining traitors rushed to block him. Several guardsmen dragged Xu Ruoyu away, leaving a jagged trail of blood in their wake.

"Don't let him escape!" Shen Jue shouted between slashes.

But it was too late. As the human tide swallowed them again, the guards hauling off Xu Ruoyu retreated farther and farther. Xiahou Lian desperately cut down the obstacles before him, firing several crossbow bolts in succession—each one missed as the targets fled beyond range. He turned back to find fresh enemies swarming Shen Jue, whose strikes had slowed dramatically, likely due to his injured hand. Xiahou Lian sprinted over, flipping like a swallow over Shen Jue's head, then plunging both his blades into separate skulls as he landed.

Realizing that they stood no chance against this pair, the last few survivors scattered. The ground was strewn with dismembered limbs, fallen leaves, and wild grass, all equally soaked in blood. Both Shen Jue and Xiahou Lian were nearing exhaustion, particularly Xiahou Lian, whose hands trembled now that he'd slaughtered his way through the horde.

Supporting each other, they abandoned the battlefield and found a gentler slope down the cliff. The overgrown weeds and tall shrubs below provided cover. Crouching among the brush concealed them completely, and they rested near the cliff's carved Buddha reliefs. Water lay just a few dozen paces ahead. There were no spies nearby, so the imperial guards wouldn't find them for now.

The tension in Shen Jue's mind finally snapped. His legs gave out, his limbs weak as cotton, and dizziness washed over him. His illness had worsened considerably. Gritting his teeth, he slumped against a rock, glancing at Xiahou Lian, who now sprawled on the ground gasping, barely recognizable beneath layers of blood.

"Rest," Xiahou Lian said.

Once Shen Jue's breathing steadied, Xiahou Lian fetched water from the pool, washing his face and hands before returning to Shen Jue's side. He offered him a waterskin. "There's only one left. You'll have to make do with sharing."

That pool still held the corpse Shen Jue had prepared, so although the water wasn't stagnant, the thought of drinking it sickened him. He hesitated until Xiahou Lian muttered, "Disgusted by me?"

Shen Jue shook his head and drank. The icy water jolted through him, eliciting a shiver. Xiahou Lian reclaimed the skin and gulped half the water down at once.

"Why did you refuse to jump off the cliff with me?" Shen Jue asked, his brow furrowed. "I'd already planned it all out. We could've gotten away by feigning our deaths."

"Your plan was to jump off a cliff?" Xiahou Lian arched a brow. "Do you know how cold a mountain pool is? If you'd dived in, you'd have ended up soaked to the bone and battered by mountain winds without even a dry change of clothes. If you walked away from that alive, I'd change my name to Lian Houxia!"

Shen Jue fell silent, then turned away. "I would've been fine."

Xiahou Lian turned to study him. Shen Jue's face was as pale as paper, and his lips resembled faded begonia petals, bloodless but for a hint

of pink. He appeared listless and drained, his head drooping. After a long look, Xiahou Lian suddenly leaned in.

Shen Jue started. “What are you—”

“Stay still,” Xiahou Lian interrupted. He pressed his hands down on Shen Jue’s shoulders and pushed their foreheads together.

Shen Jue froze. Xiahou Lian had never before initiated such closeness. Even when they’d shared a bed, they’d maintained distance. His proximity enveloped Shen Jue in a wild aura, bloodied and primal. Xiahou Lian’s lips hovered unbearably close; Shen Jue could feel his steady breath. His mind cleared slightly. Eyes narrowing, he gripped Xiahou Lian’s waist belt.

Beauty within reach, thoughts in disarray. “A-Lian…”

But Xiahou Lian pulled back. “Great—you didn’t even jump, and you still fell ill.” He stood and undid his belt, tearing off a strip of his clean undershirt. After wetting it in the pool, he pressed the cool cloth to Shen Jue’s forehead. Only then did Shen Jue realize that Xiahou Lian had been checking him for fever.

“You think you’re invincible? You’re frail as a chick,” Xiahou Lian grumbled, guiding Shen Jue’s head to his shoulder. “Rest. We’ll find a way down soon.”

Frail as a chick… No one had ever spoken to him like that before. Shen Jue wanted to retort, but the strength to speak had mostly left him. He only managed a faint murmur. “You’re the chick. And don’t bother—the mountain’s cut off. There’s no way down.”

Xiahou Lian glanced at him. “You knew beforehand?”

“Knew what?”

“That someone was targeting you—that today was a death trap.” Xiahou Lian paused, then added, “And did you instruct Situ to tell me that the pilgrimage was scheduled for the day after tomorrow?”

Shen Jue gave a noncommittal grunt, a wordless verification, and closed his eyes to rest. Xiahou Lian fell silent, staying motionless as Shen Jue leaned against him. Shen Jue sensed something amiss and lifted his head slightly to study the other man.

Xiahou Lian's brow was furrowed, his thoughts unreadable. The makeup over his eyes had washed away, revealing a faint scar. His features were sharp—when killing, he radiated the ferocity of a demonic asura—yet his nature was soft. In stillness, his expression eased into something weathered and introspective. When he frowned, a solitary coldness enveloped him as though a tombstone weighed on his heart.

For the first time, Shen Jue found himself uncertain of Xiahou Lian's mood. Xiahou Lian had always been easygoing around him, full of laughter and teasing. Shen Jue had never seen him this solemn. *Is he…angry?* After a moment's thought, Shen Jue said, "Your presence would only have distracted me."

"You think that I'd have held you back, Shaoye?" Xiahou Lian asked.

"That's not what I meant."

"What'd you mean, then?"

"Xiahou Lian," Shen Jue replied, frustration simmering beneath his restraint, "your mother went to great lengths to secure you a home and identity, all so that you could live a peaceful life. You just need to stay put. These matters are mine to handle—they're not your concern." He wanted to say more, but Xiahou Lian turned and gripped his shoulders, locking eyes with him. Shen Jue stilled as he met Xiahou Lian's gaze—its pitch-black depths had hardened into unyielding iron.

"I know what you're thinking," said Xiahou Lian. "You want to shield me—keep me out of danger. Right?"

Shen Jue clenched his fist, glanced away, and nodded tersely.

"I don't need that, though."

Shen Jue glared at him. "You—!"

Xiahou Lian interrupted him, pressing his finger to Shen Jue's lips. "Listen. Since when does a subordinate laze at home while his master walks into peril? I do understand, Shaoye—I know that you protect me, refusing to let me charge ahead as your vanguard. But…at the very least, let me fight beside you."

Shen Jue remained stubborn, his expression brittle. "I have my own plans. I don't need you." He'd planned out his every step. The map of these

mountains was etched into his mind—every rock, every leaf accounted for. The only variable he hadn't anticipated was falling ill, but even that would have been manageable. He knew enough about herbs to tend to himself. From the depths of the palace to the front lines of the court, things had always been this way. He was accustomed to looking out for himself. It didn't matter.

"Really?" Xiahou Lian's disbelief was palpable. "Xu Ruoyu was a traitor, and that bastard impersonated the prince of Fu. Doesn't that matter?"

"No."

"Really?"

Shen Jue fell silent for a moment before reluctantly admitting, "No."

Xiahou Lian's grip on Shen Jue's shoulders tightened. His palms burned through the fabric like two brands pressed against Shen Jue's skin. "Shaoye," Xiahou Lian said, each word deliberate, "Before, I didn't choose to be the Garden's blade. But now I'm your blade, and it's what I want. So tell me, who is your enemy? Is it Wan Bohai, or someone else?" His gaze sharpened like the edge of a frost-coated razor. "Whoever it is, I'll kill them."

Chapter 75:
Blazing Beauty

SHEN JUE LOWERED HIS EYES, studying the qilin embroidered on Xiahou Lian's sleeves. Torn and stained with blood, they revealed an equally soiled underrobe beneath. *What an idiot!* he thought. After barely escaping Qiye Garden, Xiahou Lian had nearly thrown his life away again. But despite his anger, something fluttered wildly in Shen Jue's chest like a sparrowhawk soaring into the clouds. If Xiahou Lian would risk his own life for him, did that mean Shen Jue mattered more to him than life itself?

Well, it was too late for regrets now. They were grasshoppers tied to the same string, their lives and fates bound together. There was no longer any point in hiding the truth. "It's the empress dowager," Shen Jue said, pressing his lips together.

Xiahou Lian stiffened. "But didn't you just put her son on the throne? Is she burning bridges already?"

"Not exactly." Shen Jue's voice was calm. "I'm deliberately raising her son to be incompetent. Of course she'd turn against me."

"You're raising him to be…incompetent?"

"That's right," Shen Jue replied, his expression remaining blank. "In all honesty, I'm the true villain here. The empress dowager is simply trying to rid the world of a scourge. That Yao woman wasn't wrong—I'm no better than Wei De." He turned to watch the golden leaves swirl through the air like butterflies, his tone sardonic. "The young emperor may just be a child, but he already has the makings of a tyrant. I fill his ears with music and his belly with feasts. Memorials of remonstrance never reach the big cat enclosure, nor does the people's suffering pierce the palace walls. Only when an emperor is decadent and dissolute do men like us have a place to stand."

Xiahou Lian stared at him, lost for words. "Shaoye…"

"As you can see, Xiahou Lian, eunuchs like me survive by sucking the marrow from the bones of Great Qi." Shen Jue's voice was icy. "So the

empress dowager is right to want me dead. And it’s not just her—every upright minister at court prays for my demise.”

He kept his gaze fixed ahead, not daring to look at Xiahou Lian beside him lest he see shock or disgust in those eyes. The rumors of the common folk, the insults of the imperial guards—none of those bothered him. Only Xiahou Lian’s revulsion, however slight, could undo him. He’d hidden too much. The world saw only his glory but never the servility beneath—not even Xiahou Lian had witnessed that. That festering truth was like a boil carefully concealed beneath fine brocade. One day, the robes would be torn away to reveal the rot beneath, laying the pus and pain bare.

There was no turning back now. As chief of the Eastern Depot, he’d committed too many sins, made too many enemies. If he ever lost his position, everyone would join in to help kick down the toppling wall. Being trampled by thousands or torn apart by horses would be a mercy. Yet he had no desire to turn back. Retreating to live as a commoner sounded simple, but taxes and forced labor took both the money and the lives of such people. Any local official or village elder with a shred of power could crush him. The alternative was to become a drifter like Xiahou Lian had once been—rootless and restless. In this world, one was either the knife or the meat. He had tasted being meat when he watched Aunt Lan die helplessly under an assassin’s blade. He would never endure that again. Only by grasping power could he control his fate and protect those he cherished.

The corner of his mouth twitched. “This road leads only to darkness, and I won’t turn back. If you don’t want to wallow in the mire with me, that’s fine. Stay at the Eastern Depot and keep your hands clean. I won’t involve you in filth.”

“What nonsense are you spouting?” Xiahou Lian laughed suddenly, then winked. “Come on. I was literally an assassin. If we’re comparing misdeeds, you’ll need another lifetime to catch up with me. And honestly, I was born for this.”

Shen Jue pinched the bridge of his nose. “You needn’t comfort me. I know exactly what kind of person you are.”

“No, you don’t.” Xiahou Lian’s voice softened. “When I was little, I pulled feathers from the neighbors’ chickens for fun. I once set off firecrackers and burned down half a mountain temple. That was the first

time I saw Shixin truly furious—he hung me from the temple gates for hours to freeze in the wind. Everyone in the Garden insisted that the apple hadn't fallen far from the tree: My mother was a great villain, I was a little villain, and together we raised hell wherever we went."

This attempt at consolation only made Shen Jue feel worse. He knew Xiahou Lian too well—killing and arson had never been his preference. Otherwise, why destroy the Garden? Why change his face and disappear? Xiahou Lian had always longed for a peaceful life. Shen Jue understood that; he'd always understood. He shook his head, exhausted. "When this is over, I'll transfer you to the archives. Managing documents will suit you."

"My handwriting looks like chicken scratch. You'd trust me with paperwork?" Xiahou Lian slung an arm around Shen Jue's shoulders, and together they watched the leaves dance. "It's fine, Shaoye. Really. Did I ever tell you about my brother? He seemed slow, but he saw things more clearly than anyone. He once told me that, once you're on this path, you can't stop. If you don't keep moving forward, the ghosts beneath will drag you down by your ankles. That's true for you—and for me. We're in too deep now. So from today on, you'll be the great villain, and I'll be the little villain. Lead the way, and I'll follow—we'll be wicked together."

"But it's wrong, Xiahou Lian," Shen Jue said, tilting his head back. The mountain breeze carried whispers through the falling leaves. Each murmur said that this was wrong, sinful, damned.

Xiahou Lian smiled faintly. "It's also fate, Shaoye. Remember what I said? We never had that many choices, but if I could do it all again, I'd still kill Liu Guicang. I'd still kill Shixin. I'd still become an assassin, and I'd still become the Wuminggui, training by day and killing by night. And even given a thousand chances, I'd always choose to stand by you now. If this is wrong, if it's sinful—then, as long as you're safe, let me be damned forever." Damned to the bitter end, even if it shattered him.

Xiahou Lian wasn't a saint, and he only had two hands and one blade—enough to protect just one person. He feared neither sin nor retribution, only that Shen Jue might share his mother's fate and that he might once more be powerless to stop it.

Pagoda leaves drifted from the sky, sunlight piercing through in golden pillars alive with dancing dust. Shen Jue felt that he and Xiahou

Lian were like two motes on that luminous tide, swept along helplessly—and yet somehow, against all odds, they had found and held on to one another. His heart ached with sorrow and sweetness, a honeyed bitterness both contradictory and intoxicating. For ten years, he'd fortified himself, his heart tempered to iron in the palace's crucible. Now it softened inexplicably like cotton or a cloud—something he could cup in his hands and offer to Xiahou Lian's burning grasp.

"You're so dumb, Shaoye," said Xiahou Lian.

"You're the dumb one," Shen Jue retorted, his voice slightly choked. He didn't dare speak further, afraid that Xiahou Lian would notice.

"Always pushing me away." Xiahou Lian squeezed his shoulder firmly. "Don't do that anymore."

I won't, Shen Jue thought. He would hold on to Xiahou Lian from that point on and never let go.

"So what's our next move?"

"We'll hide," Shen Jue said. "At midnight, Situ will bring Dutch cannons[12] to bombard Guangling Temple. As long as we stay hidden in the mountains, we can leave once that bombardment ends."

Xiahou Lian's eyes widened. "You can get your hands on Dutch cannons?"

"Sun Ming, the commander of the Divine Mechanisms Camp, belonged to Wei De's old faction," Shen Jue explained. "Back when he was a regional commander in Huguang, he built shrines to Wei De and flattered him endlessly, all to secure military provisions for fighting the pirates. After Wei De fell, Sun Ming surrendered to me to save his own skin. That's why he was merely demoted, rather than sharing Li Xian's fate—having his family exiled and the women sent to the Royal Academy. If I fall now, there'll be no one left to protect him. So if the Divine Mechanisms Camp 'loses' a cannon overnight and 'recovers' it the next day… Well, it's an offense, and not a particularly small nor large one. But either way, it's better than losing his life."

So all they had to do was avoid detection by the imperial guards.

Xiahou Lian stood to survey the terrain, calculating what the best escape route would be if enemies approached. He and Shen Jue would need shelter too—but a cave would be too risky, as they could easily be trapped inside. They needed cover with an easy exit. Settling Shen Jue against a rock to rest, Xiahou Lian climbed a tree to scout.

About three hundred paces away, a patrol of over thirty guardsmen passed by. Those foot soldiers might lack skill, but numbers alone could overwhelm Xiahou Lian and his companion. Even locusts became unstoppable in swarms; men certainly were. Uneasy, Xiahou Lian slipped down to discuss the situation with Shen Jue, only to find his companion asleep, his pallor even more translucent under the sunlight. A touch to his forehead confirmed that his fever was worsening; his arms and neck were alarmingly hot. The exhausting journey and exposure to the wind had aggravated his condition.

This young lady is truly made of paper, thought Xiahou Lian. *A breeze could topple him.* Someone this fragile had wanted to fake his death by leaping off a cliff? That was a sure way to turn a pretend death into a real one.

After reflection, an idea struck Xiahou Lian. He hoisted Shen Jue onto his back, then scaled the cliff to strip sets of clothing and armor from two of the corpses there.

The jostling roused Shen Jue, who mumbled groggily, “What are you doing?”

“Go back to sleep. Don’t worry about it.” Xiahou Lian walked until he found a rock that could serve as a wind shelter. Easing Shen Jue down, he changed out of his own clothes, then started to peel away Shen Jue’s.

Still dazed, Shen Jue was only dimly aware of hands rummaging beneath his robe and undoing his belt. Startled, he snapped his eyes open and grabbed Xiahou Lian’s hand, his stare full of simmering rage like a brewing storm. “What are you doing?”

“Helping you change. What else?” said Xiahou Lian, baffled. “They’ve sent out more search parties, thirty men per squad. You’re sick as a dog, and I can’t fight them all alone. We’ll have to disguise ourselves and hide in their camp until midnight.”

A sound strategy—the most dangerous place was also the safest. But…

Shen Jue tightened his belt. “I’ll get changed myself.”

It occurred to Xiahou Lian that Shen Jue might not want to expose his scar. The realization twisted his heart. After all their time together, he’d nearly forgotten that Shen Jue was a eunuch. Unlike most eunuchs, Shen Jue always carried a subtle fragrance, likely from incense, that had none of his cohort’s typical unpleasant odor. And his beauty surpassed not just that of other eunuchs but most intact men. Xiahou Lian nodded, then tactfully walked from behind the boulder and waited. He heard fabric rustle and layers of silk pool softly on the ground.

After a long moment, Shen Jue’s muffled voice filtered past the boulder. “Done.”

Xiahou Lian returned to find Shen Jue looking displeased, and began to explain, “I figured that if you had your undergarments on, it wouldn’t matter if I helped—”

“I’m not angry with you,” Shen Jue cut him off. He seemed to want to say something else, but after a long struggle, he simply sighed and fell silent.

Xiahou Lian kneaded some mud in his palm and crouched before Shen Jue. “Let me disguise you, then?”

Shen Jue consented with a slight nod. Closing his eyes, he leaned back against the boulder, brow furrowed. Xiahou Lian studied him, then gently smeared mud across his face with two fingers. He darkened Shen Jue’s complexion, deepened the contours, smudged shadows beneath his eyes and dotted tiny granules on his cheeks. Shen Jue’s original face vanished. Unlike real cosmetics, mud was rough and dry, which worked well for their purposes: Shen Jue now resembled a hard-toiling farmer, his skin suntanned and weatherbeaten. Xiahou Lian added a final layer of mud for good measure and warned Shen Jue to speak little while they were in the camp. His refined speech and noble bearing would stand out dangerously.

Shen Jue endured the ministrations listlessly. His head throbbed, and he couldn’t muster any more energy.

Lastly, Xiahou Lian plucked some rust-red trumpet flowers from the rock crevices and crushed them in his palm until their scarlet juices seeped out. He dabbed the liquid onto his fingertip and gently smeared it over Shen Jue's lips. Shen Jue's pale skin bloomed vivid red wherever Xiahou Lian pressed down. The blossoms themselves were reddish-brown, but the juice was an unexpectedly bright, eye-catching scarlet, glazing Shen Jue's lips with alluring brilliance. Xiahou Lian's mind drifted unbidden to his memory of Shen Jue sucking his finger—his lips had been just as lustrous then, resembling peach blossoms.

Xiahou Lian's face burned fiercely. He quickly used his other hand to rub Shen Jue's lips, hoping to wipe away the crimson juice. But the more he rubbed those soft lips with his fingers, the more red and vibrant they became, as if the juice had seeped in to bestow the lushness of spring upon them.

Shen Jue winced awake at the rough pressure on his lips. He groggily opened his eyes and murmured, "It hurts."

His hazy gaze on Xiahou Lian was inexplicably captivating. Those watery eyes were like calm, moonlit pools replete with gentle ripples. Paired with those lips, now rubbed crimson, he had a beauty born of vulnerability—like a pear blossom in the rain or a begonia touched by frost.

Xiahou Lian's heart pounded wildly. He felt a sudden desire to bully Shen Jue, make him cry and beg for mercy. Shocked at himself, he immediately crushed the impulse. How could he think such a thing? Shen Jue had given him nothing but his absolute trust—such filthy thoughts were unforgivable!

Nervous, he began to ramble. "I…I messed up the color. You should just lick it away yourself. The flowers aren't poisonous, just bitter." He slathered mud on his own face, then hauled Shen Jue onto his back and hurried down the mountain.

Chapter 77:
Twin Desires Under a Silken Canopy

SHEN JUE AWOKE TO FIND HIMSELF wrapped in a blanket, his discarded armor piled at his side. He still wore the military uniform, which was now drenched in sticky, reeking sweat. He was so uncomfortable he wished he could peel off his own skin, but there was no helping it—he had to endure. He pushed himself up and touched his forehead. His fever had broken, leaving him clearheaded and strong-limbed.

He lay across two storage chests beneath a soot-blackened ceiling with exposed beams. A Buddhist statue stood in the center of the room, and incense sticks smoldered in a burner. All around him, wounded guards rested on bedrolls spread over the floor. One even lay facedown in his bedding beneath the altar table. Shen Jue recognized this place as Anle Hall, which sat outside the mountain gates of Guangling Temple; the imperial guards had apparently repurposed it as a field hospital. Sitting up, he looked around for Xiahou Lian.

A physician with a thin, curled mustache approached, smiling. “Awake? How do you feel—better?”

Shen Jue nodded. “Where’s the man who brought me here?”

“Ah—you mean Xia Lao-er?” The physician jerked his chin toward the door. “He’s outside, chatting with the men. I’ll fetch him.”

The medical officer soon returned with Xiahou Lian, whose face was still smeared with black grime. Seeing Shen Jue awake, he grinned, revealing his gleaming white teeth. He leaned close and pressed his forehead to Shen Jue’s, confirming with relief that Shen Jue’s fever had lifted.

“Xie Lao-san, you have no idea how good your gege is to you!” the medical officer teased. “He waited on you hand and foot, hunting down blankets and even going to the temple for honeysuckle to brew your medicine. He even scored you a bowl of rice porridge—no idea how he

managed that. Ha! We're all brothers-in-arms here, but only you had such luck!"

The wounded guards guffawed. "Aye!" they chimed in. "Why no porridge for us?"

Xiahou Lian glared at them. "Cut the crap!"

Shen Jue hazily recalled being fed medicine and porridge during his delirium. *Xie Lao-san?* He nearly scoffed aloud. Xiahou Lian's chosen names were atrocious. Xia Lao-er, Xie Lao-san—they sounded like beggar brothers from some backwater alley.

Still, he marveled at how effortlessly Xiahou Lian bantered with the wounded guards—the man was a natural. Shen Jue had been unconscious for only a few short hours, yet Xiahou Lian and the guardsmen were already addressing each other as brothers. It made sense—the imperial guard was huge, and their soldiers had been spread in squads across the mountains, where they'd been routed by Xiahou Lian and the Eastern Depot agents hiding there. Now the wounded from different units were mingling, completely unfamiliar with one another. Xiahou Lian's military experience and roguish charm allowed him to infiltrate this particular "den of bandits" as easily as a fish would water.

"Hey, young Xie-xiongdi!" a soldier called to Shen Jue. "Be honest—we've got bets riding on this: Is Xia-erge your qixiong? If not, I'll lose silver!"

The concept of qixiong and qidi—bonded brothers—came from coastal Fujian. The culture there was highly liberal, and same-sex couples could join together in intimate union. This differed from the way men in the capital or Jiangzhe simply exploited young male prostitutes. The bonded brothers in Fujian followed formal marriage rites, rendering their unions effectively indistinguishable from conventional marriages.

Xiahou Lian was a very experienced man; he'd heard of that kind of thing long ago. Silently, he cursed the vulgar soldiers for their loose tongues and crude jokes. He knew that, as a youth, Shen Jue had suffered enough humiliation from eunuchs craving male companionship—Sixi, for example, and that wretched eunuch from the imperial kitchen—Shen Jue had killed them both to escape their harassment. If anyone despised the notion of male

love, it would be Shen Jue—yet here these men were, spewing nonsense in front of him.

Xiahou Lian opened his mouth to curse them but then heard Shen Jue say calmly, “My apologies, but I’ve cost you silver. I’m older, so I’m the qixiong. He usually calls me ‘Gege.’”

The soldiers laughed. “We *all* guessed wrong! It seems no one wins or loses!”

Xiahou Lian stared at Shen Jue, dumbfounded.

An unperturbed Shen Jue flipped aside his blanket to rise and step outside. The room’s stifling air had been unbearable, but the sunlight outside was just right. The courtyard was planted with ginkgo trees; their golden leaves fluttered in the mountain breeze and carpeted the ground like scattered gold. Shielding his eyes with a hand, Shen Jue looked toward the mountain gate. The ancient road at the end of the winding stone steps was lined with the tents of imperial guards. Soldiers stood sentry every ten paces along the path, their goose-quill sabers glinting gold amid the swirling ginkgo leaves.

Xiahou Lian followed him out. “Why’d you say that?” he asked.

Shen Jue shot him a sidelong glance. “What? Is being my qidi so humiliating?”

Xiahou Lian hadn’t expected him to joke like this. Well, as long as Shen Jue didn’t mind, he supposed it was fine. His own reputation was already in tatters, so what did this matter?

Shen Jue paced a few steps, then mused, “This year, you’re already twenty-four—yet I’ve never seen a woman by your side. In the past, I heard rumors of your many romantic entanglements, but you claim they were all fabrications. No concubines, no mistresses—nothing. Sometimes, I really wonder if you avoid women because you *do* prefer men.”

“You’re overthinking it,” Xiahou Lian replied, somewhat annoyed. “I’m a proper man. Back at Yunxian Tower, there was a male brothel right next door, and I never set foot in it once.”

Shen Jue made a noncommittal sound, clasping his hands behind his back. “There’s supposedly a famous actor in Rouge Lane—Yuguan-er or

something. I once heard him sing *The Rain on the Parasol Tree* at Shen Wenxing's residence. His face was quite beautiful, rivaling even a woman's. Have you seen him?"

Xiahou Lian said he had.

"Oh?" said Shen Jue, feigning curiosity. "And you weren't tempted?"

"His beauty is just powder and paint—slap some on my face, and I'd look just as pretty!" Xiahou Lian scoffed. "Besides, you're far better looking than him, and I've never been tempted by you." As he spoke, Xiahou Lian recalled that day when Shen Jue had licked his finger, and his heart wavered guiltily. Coughing a few times, he added, "I haven't married because I've sworn off romantic entanglements. And let's be honest—I'm broke, and I still owe you a mountain of debt. Where would I even find the money to support a wife? Forget it."

Shen Jue listened, but only one sentence entered his ears: *"You're far better looking than him, and I've never been tempted by you."* He felt like his chest had been hollowed out, leaving an emptiness behind. Still, he clung stubbornly to one hope—Xiahou Lian might not like men, but he didn't want a woman either. There was still a chance! "What about those who prefer men?" he asked. "Do you find them repulsive?"

Xiahou Lian frowned in thought. *Repulsive?* Not exactly. Qiu-shifu had come from that trade; plenty of male courtesans worked for the Garden. And many assassins even dabbled in such affairs. He was used to it. But Shen Jue must loathe such inclinations, so Xiahou Lian had to make his stance clear. Weighing his words carefully, he replied, "I don't really care—it has nothing to do with me. But I could never be like that."

Shen Jue's heart sank completely, yet he maintained his calm facade. Humming faintly, he tilted his head to watch the leaves' dappled shadows of leaves, overcome by melancholy. With a single glance, he could melt Zhuxia, but Xiahou Lian was like unyielding iron—impervious to water or flame, and utterly immune to provocation. Shen Jue would have to redouble his efforts, deploying every trick he'd learned in the palace. Faced with such tactics, Xiahou Lian would have no choice but to surrender.

"Enough of this." Xiahou Lian stepped closer to Shen Jue and lowered his voice. "Let's talk business. Xu Ruoyu isn't in the convalescence camp. I asked the wounded—apparently some guards were

sent back to the capital for treatment, and I suspect Xu Ruoyu was among them. If not, he's dead. Once we return to the Eastern Depot, we'll find a way to track him down."

The problem was that the empress dowager would likely have him well-hidden. Shen Jue frowned. "Has Her Majesty returned to the palace? Where is Wan Bohai?"

Xiahou Lian shook his head. "They're both at Guangling Temple—supposedly for Buddhist rites."

"Buddhist rites?" Shen Jue laughed mockingly. The pilgrimage to Guangling Temple had already devolved into chaos. The young emperor had long since been sent back to the palace, leaving only swarms of imperial guards and fleeing Eastern Depot agents in the mountains. To perform rites after committing slaughter directly beneath the Buddha's gaze—what hypocrisy! He turned toward Guangling Temple. "Fine. Let's go pay our respects too."

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IT WAS ALREADY MID-AFTERNOON, and the sun cast slanting shadows. Golden light spilled over the glazed tiles of Guanyin Hall, filtering through the leaves of the sal tree and illuminating the vermilion doors and gilded dragon motifs beneath the eaves, making the colorful paintings even more garish. Below the building's white marble railings, armored guards patrolled with heavy, metallic footsteps.

Disguised as patrolling soldiers, Xiahou Lian and Shen Jue brushed past the guards at the railings and ascended the steps. Incense smoke curled up from censers inside the hall. The doors were shut, and no guards were stationed outside—Zhuxia alone stood watch. Lost in thought, she sat on a stone stool and stared blankly at her feet, her expression grim.

Xiahou Lian and Shen Jue exchanged a glance, then circled to the rear of the hall. They found the back wall unguarded. Pressing his ear to the door, Xiahou Lian faintly heard a man and woman speaking inside, their words indistinct. He gestured for Shen Jue to stay back, then poked a hole

in the window paper to peer in. The thousand-armed, thousand-eyed Guanyin loomed before him, radiant in gold. Her lotus throne crushed a host of grimacing demons in postures of supplication, some rolling their eyes back, others wailing in agony. A red silk altar cloth was draped over the offering table, its ends pooling on the ground. Behind the statue was a partition wall. Beyond that lay the main chamber, likely housing another Guanyin—perhaps the Child-Granting Guanyin or the Lotus-Holding Guanyin.[13] From that area came the voices of the empress dowager and Wan Bohai.

Xiahou Lian signaled to Shen Jue: *Let's go in and see.*

Deeming this too risky, Shen Jue shook his head. As they crouched by the door locked in a silent standoff, the conversation inside abruptly fell silent. It was replaced by a woman's soft, indistinct murmurs. Xiahou Lian pointed to the red silk hanging off the altar. "It'll be fine," he mouthed. He gently eased the door open a crack, then slipped inside and rolled beneath the silk. Shen Jue followed, carefully closing the door behind him before joining Xiahou Lian under the table.

The space beneath the altar was a tight fit for two grown men. Xiahou Lian lay flat—if he bent his knees slightly, the long, narrow space just barely accommodated him. He attempted to turn sideways to make room, but before he could do so, Shen Jue pressed him down by climbing atop him, covering his body entirely.

"It can't be helped," Shen Jue murmured softly in his ear. "Bear with me a little longer."

Shen Jue's expression was perfectly innocent, and Xiahou Lian didn't let his own thoughts stray. From their position, they could clearly hear the sounds issuing from the main chamber. A woman's drawn-out moans, a man's heavy panting, the violent creaking of the altar as it shook—each noise carried, distinct, through the thin partition wall.

Face to face, Xiahou Lian and Shen Jue stared at each other as they belatedly realized that they were eavesdropping on a couple's intimate moments. Xiahou Lian couldn't help feeling awkward.

They now understood the relationship between the empress dowager and Wan Bohai. It wasn't entirely surprising; women in the emperor's

harem were long starved for companionship and often sought solace with military commanders or imperial guards. The empress dowager was the most revered woman in the Forbidden City, yet also the loneliest. Here, against the sacred altar, their passion surged like the tide, wave after wave crashing over them until all of Guanyin Hall seemed to quake.

The light was low beneath the altar cloth, the red silk filtering the slanted sunlight into mere slivers of a soft glow. Shen Jue was too close—Xiahou Lian could even feel his warm breath. He raised his eyes; the dim light obscured Shen Jue's disguised, gritty skin. If left only his striking brows and eyes visible; they pierced straight into Xiahou Lian's heart.

It skipped a beat. The partition wall seemed to vibrate, and Xiahou Lian's heart trembled along with it. He regretted his curiosity, regretted entering the temple. Shen Jue leaned even closer now, his knees pressing Xiahou Lian's waist, his chest flush to Xiahou Lian's chest, the tip of his nose brushing Xiahou Lian's. Xiahou Lian could hear his own heartbeat pounding faster, louder, until his entire chest thrummed with its violent rhythm. He pushed at Shen Jue, trying to create distance, but Shen Jue didn't budge. His gaze roamed over Xiahou Lian's face, his cool nose grazing Xiahou Lian's cheek before reaching his reddened ear. Then Shen Jue stopped kneeling and slowly settled more fully atop him.

"My knees are tired," Shen Jue whispered in explanation. "I'm taking a break."

Xiahou Lian gritted his teeth. "You're crushing me. Ease up a little."

Shen Jue obliged, propping himself up slightly but keeping his arms pressed tightly against Xiahou Lian's body. Xiahou Lian could feel the smoothness of Shen Jue's skin through the military uniform. On the other side of the partition wall, the empress dowager's cries grew louder, the tide of her passion crashing over Guanyin Hall and flooding the cramped space beneath the altar. Xiahou Lian felt as though he were afloat on the crest of a wave, dizzy and disoriented.

The empress dowager's voice drifted over, a drawl so cloying it seemed sticky with honey. "Oh, Bohai…"

Xiahou Lian snapped out of his daze. He bit the tip of his tongue, forcing himself alert again.

“How are your subject’s services, Your Majesty?” the male voice asked. “Does that feel good?”

“Very good,” the empress dowager laughed. “Once Shen Jue is dead, you may come and go from Cining Palace as you please. There will be no need to hide anymore.”

“Thank you for your grace, Your Majesty. For that privilege alone, I will seize Eunuch Shen and ensure that there are no obstacles to our future.”

The empress dowager sighed wistfully. “It’s a shame we haven’t caught him yet. These mountains may not be vast, but they aren’t small either. Where could he possibly be hiding?”

“Your Majesty needn’t worry. Leave everything to me. If I ever let such matters trouble you, I’d deserve a beating.”

The altar shook violently as if on the verge of collapse; it seemed that Wan Bohai had suddenly moved with great force. A long moment passed before the empress dowager could speak again. “Don’t underestimate Shen Jue. He’s a demon in human flesh. When I first gave birth to His Majesty, I knew nothing—only that I had to bide my time and act cautiously. Shen Jue taught me how to speak and carry myself, what to say in every situation, what to avoid. He left nothing out. In truth, I wouldn’t be who I am today without him.”

“Then we’ll leave his corpse intact to thank him for his teaching,” Wan Bohai said, then chuckled. “No, wait—even if we wanted to, we couldn’t. As a eunuch, he’s already missing his spout! An intact corpse won’t be possible.”

“No matter. A eunuch like Shen Jue would have long since reclaimed his ‘jewels’[14] from the castrator. I’ve heard that there’s a saying among eunuchs: ‘The higher we hang our jewels, the higher we rise.’ Shen Jue’s jewels must be hanging from his roof beams by now!”

Wan Bohai burst into loud laughter.

Shen Jue’s expression went sinister, eyes darkening with brewing storms. Xiahou Lian seethed as well; his vision had gone almost dark with rage. He tapped Shen Jue’s shoulder, pointed at himself, then made a throat-slitting gesture to signal his intent to go kill the two lovers. The gloom in Shen Jue’s eyes dissipated instantly, and his lips curved into a smile.

Ruffling Xiahou Lian’s hair, he shook his head, indicating that it wasn’t necessary.

“The palace gates will soon be locked. I must go,” the empress dowager said. The lovers’ voices were growing closer as they approached.

Shen Jue lifted his head. A blurred shadow appeared beyond the red silk—a woman’s bare legs. The empress dowager had walked over without even bothering to dress.

“Your Majesty, don’t rush!” Wan Bohai pleaded. “It’s so rare that we get a chance to meet like this. Don’t you miss your subject?”

Noticing that Shen Jue was still staring upward, Xiahou Lian slipped a hand over his eyes—such filth wasn’t worth dirtying his gaze with. In the darkness behind Xiahou Lian’s palm, Shen Jue blinked. His long, curved lashes brushed Xiahou Lian’s fingers, tickling him like the tip of a feather grazing his heart. Xiahou Lian shivered, withdrawing his hand.

After another round of lingering intimacy, the empress dowager and Wan Bohai reluctantly dressed and left. Guanyin Hall fell silent, though the air still carried traces of their passion. The slanting sunlight no longer reached inside, and the space beneath the altar plunged into darkness. Their surroundings were utterly quiet but for their shallow breath.

Xiahou Lian nudged Shen Jue. “Shaoye, they’re gone. You can get off now.”

But Shen Jue didn’t move. He paused, then chuckled low, whispering in Xiahou Lian’s ear. “Call me ‘Gege,’ and I’ll get off.”

Chapter 78:
A Lone Shadow Now Paired

LIKE HELL I'M CALLING YOU THAT! Xiahou Lian stubbornly pushed at Shen Jue again. "Hurry up and get off!" he urged. "Do you have any idea how heavy you are? You're crushing my chest!"

Shen Jue didn't budge. "Call me 'Gege.'"

This guy's really getting into his role as qixiong! Xiahou Lian felt a headache coming on. *Call him "Gege"? Why not just ask me to call him "Daddy"?* Stubborn as an ox, Xiahou Lian clenched his jaw and refused to speak, and Shen Jue continued to weigh him down. They were locked in a stalemate, face to face, nose to nose, their breaths mingling in the dark. Every inch of skin Shen Jue touched burned as if scorched by fire, unbearably hot. Finally, Xiahou Lian couldn't take it any longer.

"How about I call you 'ancestor'?" he begged. "Oh, please get off me, my ancestor!"

That drawn-out "ancestor" shattered any suggestiveness that lingered. Shen Jue felt a wave of helplessness. Xiahou Lian was likely the most formidable opponent he'd ever encountered. This couldn't be rushed; he had to take it slow. Relenting, Shen Jue got off of Xiahou Lian and crawled from beneath the altar into the main chamber.

On the sacred altar rested a towering statue of the Lotus-Holding Guanyin, her golden face tilted down. Her half-lidded eyes brimmed with boundless compassion yet simultaneously exuded an aloof, impassive indifference.

Xiahou Lian followed Shen Jue. Seeing the altar, he frowned. "I can't believe they dared to do such things under the Bodhisattva's gaze. Aren't they afraid of divine retribution? And why did you stop me from killing them? That would've solved everything."

Shen Jue shook his head. "If the empress dowager and Wan Bohai suddenly died here, I'd be the prime suspect. If I hope to secure my position, maintaining a good relationship with the emperor will be the most

crucial thing, and the empress dowager is His Majesty's mother. Even if no evidence implicated me, he'd still hold a grudge when he grew older and wiser. It wouldn't be worth it."

He turned his gaze to Xiahou Lian. "My position as chief of the Eastern Depot may seem glorious on the surface, but in the end, I'm just the emperor's servant. If the emperor wants me dead, I must die. But as long as the emperor remains oblivious and uninvolved in governance, leaving his power in my hands, I have nothing to fear. Someone must govern this vast empire, and if the emperor won't do it, he has no choice but to rely on me. The more indispensable I am, the more secure my position."

Xiahou Lian felt stifled. He didn't know what to say. He knew there were no free lunches in this world—everything came at a cost, and everyone was the same. With a sigh, he let it go, asking, "So what's our next move? We've got dirt on the empress dowager and Wan Bohai. Shouldn't we use it against them?"

Shen Jue walked to the altar and stirred the incense ashes. Smoke curled upward, veiling his face in a haze. After a moment's contemplation, he said, "Wan Bohai can't die yet—we need him alive. Is he staying in the temple or the camp below the mountain?"

"The temple, of course," Xiahou Lian replied. "The empress dowager is his lover—why would he sleep in a tent with the other guards? He's resting in the imperial quarters."

"When we got here earlier, did you notice the temple's defenses?"

Xiahou Lian used an incense stick to sketch a rough map of Guangling Temple on the table. "It has three sections. The east section contains the monks' quarters, the middle area contains the Buddha halls, and the west section is the imperial consorts' quarters. Wan Bohai is staying there, and the guards are mostly stationed around it. From what I saw, there should be about fifty men in the Buddha halls. What I don't know is the exact layout inside the courtyard."

Drawing from memory, Shen Jue refined Xiahou Lian's map. He was intimately familiar with Guangling Temple's layout, thanks to the annual pilgrimage there. "The imperial quarters have only one eastern gate. That should have a few guards. Inside, there's the Liubei Pavilion, then the main hall entrance, each with its own guards. Patrols would cover the path from

the ancient cypress to the hall. If we eliminate the guards along that route, we can enter unimpeded and extract Wan Bohai."

"If each checkpoint has four guards, and the patrols have eight, that's about twenty men." Xiahou Lian crossed his arms. "If we operate like assassins and take them out quietly one by one… It's doable."

"The imperial guards rest at nine in the evening. We'll act then," Shen Jue declared, finalizing the plan.

They retraced their steps out of Guanyin Hall. Outside, the sky had darkened, and faint stars flickered on the horizon, gradually brightening into a sprawling expanse. They ate at the convalescence camp, waiting for the hour when the guards would go to sleep.

Suddenly, a group emerged from behind the screen wall—a squad of imperial guards escorting a band of over fifty Eastern Depot agents. Covered in blood, the agents hung their heads low, their black-and-gold-patterned pleated garments torn and tattered. Zhu Shunzi stood among them, limping and dejected. The imperial guards must have intercepted their retreat and forced them back up the mountain.

Xiahou Lian and Shen Jue exchanged a glance, then followed at a distance as the prisoners were led to two rooms at the rear of the convalescence camp. The guards locked them inside and stationed two sentries at the door.

Shen Jue's expression darkened. He sat on a stone bench beneath a ginkgo tree, his brow furrowed in thought.

"How about we split up?" Xiahou Lian suggested. "You can rescue them, and I'll capture Wan Bohai."

"No," Shen Jue refused, his tone irritable. How could he let Xiahou Lian go to the imperial quarters alone? On the other hand, he couldn't abandon the agents. A few might be expendable, but over fifty were now imprisoned in the camp—and he'd only brought two hundred. If word spread that he'd let his subordinates die without lifting a finger to help them, it would extinguish the loyalty of those beneath him. None would follow him wholeheartedly thereafter, and cultivating trusted allies would become a struggle.

Useless fools! Shen Jue cursed inwardly. He considered attempting to capture Wan Bohai first, then returning to rescue the agents, but realized that wouldn't work either. The imperial quarters were too far from the mountain gate—the round trip would take over an hour, and they had only an hour to act. Shen Jue's head throbbed violently; he pressed his temples. The convalescence camp wasn't heavily guarded as it mostly housed wounded soldiers. Rescuing the agents wouldn't be difficult.

"You save the men, and I'll extract Wan Bohai," Shen Jue instructed. "Guangling Temple can be bombarded, although the monks must be spared. Situ will target only the central and western paths, and the monks' quarters on the east side will be safe. We'll rendezvous at Lishu Courtyard behind the ancestral hall. Agreed?"

"No," Xiahou Lian objected. "I'll go to the imperial quarters. You rescue the men."

"I wouldn't say my swordplay is worse than yours, Xiahou Lian."

"That's not the point," Xiahou Lian said, crouching beside Shen Jue and looking up at him. "Speaking of which, I've been meaning to ask—what style do you use? I taught you the Garden's saber arts, so why does your swordsmanship look so different?"

Shen Jue flicked Xiahou Lian's forehead. "You're not the one who taught me my swordplay."

"What are you talking about? I even carved you a wooden saber. I remember that clearly!" Xiahou Lian raised his brows, incredulous that Shen Jue would deny this.

"The one who taught me swordplay was your mother." Shen Jue lifted his gaze, his eyes distant as the autumn wind stirred memories from years past.

Xiahou Lian blinked. "Huh?"

"You were too lazy to spar with me back then, so I practiced alone. But every night, your mother came to duel me. She disguised herself as Consort Gao, acting mad and erratic. Her moves looked chaotic, but she always overwhelmed me. Later, I realized those 'chaotic' moves were just Garden saber arts in disguise," Shen Jue explained. "The essence of swordsmanship lies in speed and adaptation. Your mother mastered both—

her speed was unmatched, her ability to adapt unfathomable. That was what made her a grandmaster, peerless worldwide. Unfortunately, my duties left me little time to train. Even now, my speed falls short—I can't match those who've trained since childhood. So I focus on adapting instead."

Xiahou Lian considered this. "By that logic, you're my shidi."

"No, I'm your shixiong," Shen Jue corrected.

"Still, the imperial quarters need to be my job." Xiahou Lian stood and stretched. "Assassination is a craft. Just knowing blade skills isn't enough—it's about surprise. Can you walk without making a sound?" Adopting a peculiar posture, he took a few demonstration steps; his feet made no noise against the ground. "This is called Wildcat's Stride. It took me a month to learn as a kid. Can you do it?"

Shen Jue pressed his lips together in silence.

"You're not as good as I am at climbing or rooftop walking either," Xiahou Lian added.

Xiahou Lian's physical skills were undeniable; he could walk down a beam as if it were solid ground. One couldn't achieve that without being trained from childhood. Shen Jue sighed. "Fine. At a quarter to eleven, we'll meet in the Lishu Courtyard. Remember, if anything goes wrong, retreat at once. Don't dally."

Xiahou Lian grinned at him, his bold brows and bright eyes radiant in the moonlight. "Deal. Lishu Courtyard, quarter to eleven."

The moon hid behind the myriad mountains, the night thick and dark. Bamboo and trees surrounded the imperial quarters, which were linked by winding walkways with upturned eaves and intricate carvings. Red lanterns cast a hazy glow as patrolling guards marched down the walkways, their chain mail glinting faintly beneath the embroidered waves and cliffs of their dark-red pleated robes, which flickered in the lamplight.

Eight guards walked in two by two, rigidly following their assigned route. They turned in unison; instantly, a cold gleam flashed over the backs of their helmets. A shadow emerged from the darkness, its hands simultaneously encircling the necks of the two rearmost guards, and daggers sliced their throats. The four guards in front heard a noise and

turned to see their two comrades standing stiffly, heads bowed, eerie as possessed corpses.

“What’s wrong with you two?” one of the guards asked, shuddering.

Before his words faded, two streaks of cold light shot from the shadows and buried themselves in the mouths of the next two guards. Eyes wide, they collapsed. The last two drew their sabers, but a shadow pounced like a tiger, and a flash of steel cut through the darkness like lightning across a black sky. The horrified guards realized that they could no longer speak. As a warm wetness soaked their chests, they belatedly touched their throats and felt blood gushing from the slits. Xiahou Lian caught their heads and lowered them gently to the ground, then dragged all eight corpses into the shadows.

Next, Xiahou Lian crept within ten paces of the two sentries standing by the eastern gate. Hiding behind a red pillar, he tossed a pebble onto the path. One guard heard the sound; he approached cautiously, calling, “Who’s there?”

The moment the soldier passed the pillar, Xiahou Lian reached out and clamped a hand over the man’s mouth; meanwhile, his dagger flashed, slicing through his throat. The sentry immediately went limp. Xiahou Lian dragged him into the shadows as well; then he adjusted his uniform and stepped out.

His helmet cast a shadow that concealed his face. Unable to make out his features, the remaining sentry at the gate mistook him for his comrade.

“What was over there?” the sentry asked.

Xiahou Lian didn’t answer. He walked straight up to the sentry, then used his left hand to muffle the man’s mouth and his right to drive a dagger into his belly.

In the depths of the night, the assassin moved like a ghost through the shadows, killing. Blood blossomed and vanished in the darkness, fleeting as fireworks. Man by man, the number of imperial guards dwindled until the last one fell beneath the white marble railings outside the hall, his body hidden among the weeds. Gripping his bloodied goose-quill saber, Xiahou Lian ascended the steps. He crouched by the vermilion door to listen for movement inside, then glanced at the moon—it had already passed the

second upturned eave, making the time about ten in the evening. Sliding his blade into the door crack, Xiahou Lian slowly lifted the latch.

The hall was silent. Xiahou Lian slipped inside, quietly shutting the door behind him. He let his eyes adjust and crept toward the inner chamber. A carved bed loomed in the darkness, its edges faintly glinting with mother-of-pearl inlays. The apricot-yellow bed curtains were drawn tightly shut. Hunching low, Xiahou Lian reached the curtains and gently pulled them aside.

The bed was empty! Suddenly, Wan Bohai's voice rang out behind him.

"Who are you?!"

Xiahou Lian's heart lurched. He turned to see Wan Bohai standing barefoot on a daybed, shaking the sheath off a goose-quill saber he'd snatched from a weapon rack. The blade's cold gleam cut through the shadows like snow.

How come he was sleeping on the daybed? Xiahou Lian wondered. He watched Wan Bohai step down and light a candle. The hall brightened slightly, revealing Xiahou Lian in the gloom.

"To think there are traitors even within my ranks! Which battalion are you from? When did you become Eunuch Shen's dog?" Wan Bohai listened intently, then stiffened. "You killed everyone outside?"

"You can't win, Lord Wan. Surrender." Xiahou Lian angled his saber downward and slowly unsheathed it.

"Arrogance!" Wan Bohai smiled coldly. "I know who you are—the Wuminggui. Eunuch Shen must have impressive reach to command even the Garden's strongest assassin. Whatever Eunuch Shen offered you, Wuminggui, I can give you more. Wealth, women, fame, power—name your price."

Xiahou Lian chuckled faintly, glancing outside. The moon had passed the third eave—it was a quarter past ten. "Apologies, but I only wish to be the chief's dog." He dropped to one knee, his blade hidden behind his elbow. "After you, Lord Wan."

The window screens beneath the swaying trees became a shadow-puppet stage. Cast upon the pale gauze, their silhouettes resembled two wild beasts fiercely grappling in the flickering yellow candlelight.

Xiahou Lian's saber swung down, the blade splitting the air with a piercing shriek. Wan Bohai countered, but his palm shuddered violently the moment their blades clashed—the skin between his thumb and forefinger split, blood trickling out. Xiahou Lian didn't pause; he made another strike, swift as lightning. When Wan Bohai blocked, electricity seemed to course through his body.

Their sabers screamed violently, like dying men pleading. Wan Bohai saw that Xiahou Lian's hand was also bleeding; the wrappings on the hilt were soaked crimson. Yet still, Xiahou Lian didn't stop! Blow after blow rained down like a storm. As Wan Bohai retreated step by step, fear finally rose in his heart. This man was insane. The scout had been right—he was a madman! Wan Bohai's swordplay might rival the assassin's, but a man fighting to survive could never defeat one with no fear of death. Abandoning the fight, Wan Bohai turned to flee—but Xiahou Lian reached the door first and slid the bolt shut.

The assassin lifted his face in the dark, eyes savage, fangs bared. "My lord, but our battle isn't over."

The moon passed the fourth eave—it was half past ten! The men clashed again, their forms blurring. The speed of Xiahou Lian's attacks doubled, and Wan Bohai gasped for air as if crushed beneath a boulder. He couldn't keep up—Xiahou Lian's blade was just too fast. He blocked one slash only for the next to carve into his flesh. He wore no armor, so his waist, hands, and thighs were soon laced with fine cuts, soaking him in his own blood. His opponent had numerous chances to kill him, yet he held back. Suddenly, Wan Bohai understood: The attacker wanted him alive!

Xiahou Lian's saber slashed diagonally, slicing Wan Bohai's wrist. Pain flared, and Wan Bohai's blade clattered to the floor. Despair gripped him. This was a Garden assassin, a reaper moving through the night—Wan Bohai had never stood a chance.

Then the earth shook. Outside, thunder seemed to split the heavens, and a deafening roar turned the world white for an instant. Dust rained from the ceiling. Flames erupted beyond the hall, engulfing it in fiery light.

The Dutch cannons had been fired early!

Neither man could keep his footing amid the tremors, and together they crashed to the ground. Xiahou Lian's goose-quill saber slid from his grip. He swiftly crouched to retrieve it only for Wan Bohai to charge and slam him into a low desk. The impact shattered the desk, and its sharp edge drove into Xiahou Lian's back, producing an explosion of agony. Xiahou Lian staggered upright, gritting his teeth, as Wan Bohai swung a fist toward his face. Xiahou Lian ducked, his leg sweeping out to knock Wan Bohai over, but the man grabbed Xiahou Lian's ankle and pulled him to the floor.

Cannon fire continued to thunder down, and the ground convulsed violently. The two men rolled across the shuddering hall, trading brutal blows. Xiahou Lian took several punches to the face; his lip split, flooding his mouth with the metallic tang of blood. Another quake caused a falling lamp stand to crash into Wan Bohai's skull. Seizing the opening, Xiahou Lian locked Wan Bohai's wrist in an armbar. The other man thrashed wildly. Without their weapons, their struggle was reduced to bloodied fists and raw fury. In the firelight, their eyes burned vicious and ferocious.

Abruptly, Xiahou Lian jerked his head forward in a steel-reinforced headbutt that smashed into Wan Bohai's brow, splitting the skin. Blood poured from the wound as Wan Bohai reeled, his vision swimming and his grip going slack. Yanking a dagger from his belt, Xiahou Lian struck Wan Bohai's temple with the hilt, and the man at last went limp. Hoisting Wan Bohai over his shoulder, Xiahou Lian fled the crumbling hall.

Outside, an inferno raged. Flames licked the sky, staining the night crimson, like an unnatural sunset. Stumbling through the chaos, Xiahou Lian found the ancient cypress toppled, its branches ablaze. He clambered over the charred trunk, struggling to orient himself. Guangling Temple lay in ruins, the worship halls reduced to rubble.

Another streak of fire split the heavens, and a shell struck paces away as Xiahou Lian threw himself and Wan Bohai behind the cypress's trunk. The earsplitting blast seared through his skull, leaving a shrill, unending ring in his ears. Half-deafened, he hauled Wan Bohai up again and trudged doggedly toward Lishu Courtyard. Fleeing soldiers streamed past, none sparing Xiahou Lian the slightest glance. As the ringing in his ears faded, a voice pierced the roar of flames.

“Xiahou!” Zhu Shunzi and several agents sprinted toward him, gasping. “Xiahou! Thank heavens we found you!”

“Why are you here?!” Xiahou Lian bellowed.

“You didn’t show up on time! The chief led us here to search for you!”

“Where is he?!”

One agent shook his head. “We don’t know! A cannon hit just now—we got separated! Go on ahead—we’ll find the chief!”

Xiahou Lian shoved Wan Bohai at them. “Take him to Situ! Get him there no matter what! *I’ll* find the chief!”

The bombardment ceased, but the fires raged on, devouring the ruins. Golden Buddha statues peered from the wreckage, their heads gray with ash. Xiahou Lian sprinted madly back toward the imperial quarters. In the ruins near the sal tree, a feeble cry for help stopped him cold. Praying that it was Shen Jue, Xiahou Lian dropped to his knees, clawing at the debris.

These were the ruins of the main hall. It had half-collapsed from the blasts, though the ancient sal tree before it stood miraculously intact. The countless red sandalwood prayer plaques that had once hung on the tree’s branches now littered the ground. These were offerings from devout pilgrims; Guangling Temple’s sacred tree was said to grant wishes, and people journeyed from afar to tie their hopes upon its boughs. Tugging the buried man free, Xiahou Lian saw that it wasn’t Shen Jue but an imperial guard. As he turned to leave, a plaque half-buried in soot caught his gaze. Each stroke of the elegantly carved inscription was lean and forceful:

I beg the heavens to protect Xiahou Lian, to bring him home safe and soon.

Xiahou Lian froze, then picked up the charred plaque. Its tassel and red silk fringe were cloaked in grime and dust. Dozens more lay scattered around it—some bore other names, but most held his own.

I kneel in prayer for Xiahou’s safe return south.

I plead sincerely for blessings—may Xiahou Lian know peace and joy year after year.

Xiahou Lian… Xiahou Lian… Xiahou Lian…

Each stroke of ink had seeped deep into the wood. They were like distant calls echoing across ten long years and finally reaching his ears. He remembered Shen Jue's words that drizzly day: *"I did for a while. I had the beads blessed, drew divination sticks at a temple, even requested a longevity plaque.*[15] *I tried every ritual the temples offered. But what's the point? Heaven doesn't hear our prayers, and the gods don't notice our devotion. The things we cannot attain ourselves remain unattainable."*

So it had all been for Xiahou Lian. The divination sticks, the longevity tablet, the prayer beads around Shen Jue's wrist—all for him. His chest ached with bitterness. *That idiot! That absolute idiot! Why go this far? I'm not worth it—not worth any of this!* A decade-long search hadn't been enough for Shen Jue—he'd turned to gods and Buddhas, and when even gods failed, he'd charged into fire. *Idiot! Idiot!*

"Shaoye!" he roared, sprinting through the ruins. "Shen Jue! Shen Jue!"

Smoke choked the air and rubble obscured his view. Flames painted his face scarlet. When he saw a grimy hand protruding from the wreckage, he dug like a madman, desperate to uncover every face. *Not him. Not him—*

"Shen Jue!" His voice broke. "Xie Jinglan! Jinglan! Answer me!"

"Xiahou Lian!" a hoarse cry came from behind.

Xiahou Lian whirled around. At the edge of the ruins, a figure limped toward him. Shen Jue, who bristled when he found a speck of dust on his robes, now stood in tattered military garb, his hair loose and his face smeared with ash, looking like a lost beggar.

Xiahou Lian scrambled over the pile of broken tiles. Stumbling to its crest, he seized Shen Jue's arms. "What the hell were you thinking?! We agreed on Lishu Courtyard! Did you come here to die?!" Xiahou Lian's eyes were red-rimmed, his tears threatening to fall. He'd never shouted at Shen Jue like this.

"We agreed on a quarter before eleven! You never showed up! When the cannons fired, you were nowhere to be seen!" Shen Jue shouted back, his voice raw. "I thought you were dead!" He wiped Xiahou Lian's face—tears, blood, and grime were smearing together, leaving Xiahou Lian's features distorted and ghastly. Shen Jue's own eyes were red-rimmed. "We

agreed, Xiahou Lian! If there was danger, you were supposed to retreat! How did you end up like this again?!”

Xiahou Lian didn’t answer, instead scanning Shen Jue’s limbs. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine.”

Exhausted, Shen Jue gripped Xiahou Lian’s wrist. Both men trembled like leaves in a bitter wind, clinging to each other in desperate solace.

Only now did everything seem to settle. Xiahou Lian let out a laugh uglier than a sob and stepped forward, pulling Shen Jue into his arms. The world around them fell silent: The fleeing crowds, the collapsing halls…all of it seemed to vanish in an instant. Shen Jue froze. Even in their most ambiguous moments, he had never dared to embrace Xiahou Lian. Yet here Xiahou Lian stood, holding him—suddenly, fiercely, and with every ounce of his strength, as if trying to press Shen Jue into his very bones.

Damp heat touched Shen Jue's neck. It struck him then that this man was crying. Xiahou Lian—unyielding as forged iron, a man who had shed tears only once in his life, for that legendary assassin—now wept silently for *him.* Shen Jue slowly returned his embrace, his hands smoothing Xiahou Lian's shuddering back in gentle strokes.

He remembered every hug between them. The first had been in the Xie family courtyard, back when Xie Jinglan had just become a disciple and learned Xie Bingfeng didn't even recognize his face. The second had been in a narrow alley at sunset. That had been their first farewell, and he'd watched Xiahou Lian vanish around a sunlit corner on an oxcart. The third had been in the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard. A eunuch had humiliated Shen Jue, and Xiahou Lian had wiped his arms and face clean. He still recalled the osmanthus fragrance that had hung in the air, the bitterness of tears on his tongue.

For a moment, time seemed to reverse. Shen Jue wasn't the chief of the Eastern Depot, and Xiahou Lian wasn't some Garden assassin—they were just two helpless boys again, clinging tightly to one another in the dark. Mountain winds fanned the flames, firelight dancing over their bodies, and ruins stretched endlessly beneath their feet. Two small shadows in a desolate world, they were solitary yet paired, bound together in life and death from this moment forward.

"It's all right. It's all right, A-Lian. You found me. And I found you."

Softly patting Xiahou Lian's back, he spoke those words slowly, like consolations—but also like a promise.

Chapter 79:
Moonlight Illuminates the Night

NO SOONER HAD THEY RETURNED to the Eastern Depot and settled in than the Embroidered Uniform Guard came knocking.

Yang Zhaohe, the commander-in-chief of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, had arrived in person to arrest Shen Jue. He was charged with bombarding Guangling Temple, upsetting the imperial court, and reckless audacity bordering on treason. The emperor had issued an overnight decree ordering Shen Jue's imprisonment in the imperial prison. A verdict had also been reached in the case of the Yao mother and son: The Ministry of Justice found that Shen Jue had indeed condoned his subordinates' violence. With charge upon charge laid against Shen Jue, the emperor commanded that the three judicial offices convene his trial at a later date.

Xiahou Lian and Situ Jin were also arrested—the former as an accessory, and the latter as an accomplice. Yang Zhaohe further revealed that someone had accused Xiahou Lian of being the Garden assassin the Wuminggui, which added "collusion with a rebel faction" to Shen Jue's list of crimes.

Shen Wenxing had secretly taken Wan Bohai away, and Xiahou Lian and Situ Jin were thrown into the same prison cell. Shen Jue, however, received different treatment—Yang Zhaohe arranged a side room for him at the guard station. Yang, a seasoned official, knew better than to jump to conclusions. Shen Jue could still turn the tables—after all, he was the man who had brought down Wei De. One couldn't shrug him off. Furthermore, Yang owed Shen Jue a number of favors and had long positioned himself as Shen Jue's ally. While he had to uphold the law publicly, he could leave some room for private courtesy.

Xiahou Lian and Situ Jin weren't so lucky. They sat on straw mats in their cell, where a shaft of dim light filtered through a high window. The walls behind them were thick—slapping them produced a hollow thud, like striking a cliff face. Xiahou Lian was worried about Shen Jue. The guy never fought a battle he wasn't confident about winning, and they still had

Wan Bohai in their grasp, but Xu Ruoyu was a wildcard. He knew too many of Shen Jue's secrets. Hopefully, he was already dead.

When he'd parted from Xiahou Lian, Shen Jue had told him not to worry, saying that he had matters to handle and urging Xiahou Lian to rest. Xiahou Lian envisioned Shen Jue now sitting in that guard station, storax incense burning on a desk and a bowl of warm ginseng soup at his side, rows of officials waiting outside for his orders. Tomorrow, they would take down the empress dowager together. Perhaps then Xiahou Lian could happily return home and get some sleep before resuming his usual duties—catching thieves and raiding households.

Xiahou Lian lay back, his hands behind his head. Moonlight streamed through the window, and a faint breeze played with his hair with an almost tender intimacy. Suddenly, he missed Shen Jue. He wondered what he was eating, what he was reading, whether he was asleep and on what kind of bed. Could he even tolerate the guard station's bedding—that delicate brat, more pampered than a young noblewoman?

His thoughts drifted back to Guangling Temple. How embarrassing to have burst into tears on Shen Jue's shoulder like some weepy girl! Thankfully, Shen Jue hadn't laughed at him. If he had, Xiahou Lian would have wanted to vanish into the ground.

After a while, Xiahou Lian found his feelings quite strange. *We've only been apart for an hour, yet I already miss him.*

Beside Xiahou Lian sat Situ Jin, half his face shrouded in darkness. The shadows carved out his profile, stern and unyielding, like the edge of a blade. Xiahou Lian didn't know Situ Jin well, partly because his rank was too low to interact with higher-ups other than Shen Jue, and partly because Situ Jin was a man of few words, as silent as Chiyan. But where Chiyan's silence stemmed from his years of isolation on Heimianfo's peak, Situ Jin simply didn't waste words.

Rumors in the Eastern Depot painted Situ Jin as henpecked husband who took his wife's word as law, and as a doting father. Some agents claimed they'd watched his daughter ride him like a horse around their courtyard. *Who knows if that's true.*

The two prisoners sat in silence until Xiahou Lian, bored, lifted a hand to watch the moonlight spill through his fingers. Suddenly, Situ Jin

spoke.

“Are you thinking about the chief?”

Xiahou Lian blinked. “How did you—” He caught himself and swallowed the rest of his question. “Why do you ask that?”

“Just a guess. Of the people you know who are still alive, I’m only familiar with the chief.”

Xiahou Lian sat up. “That’s not what I meant. How did you know that I was thinking of someone at all?”

“When people gaze at the moon, they’re always thinking of those they miss most. The chief used to watch the moon often, for long stretches of time. Once you returned, he stopped.”

Xiahou Lian sighed inwardly. *Shen Jue… That guy is stubborn to the core.* No one else in the world clung to the past as tenaciously as he did. Recreating Qiuwu Courtyard at the Shen residence, bringing back Lianxiang, searching for Xiahou Lian all these years—Shen Jue wanted only to reclaim his past, nothing more.

After a pause, Xiahou Lian patted Situ Jin’s shoulder. “You’re thinking of someone too, aren’t you? Your wife? Is she all right at home alone? Did you send her word that you wouldn’t be back tonight?”

Situ Jin nodded. “I told her before I left. Investigating cases often keeps me out overnight—she’s used to it.” He rubbed his brow. “But she complains sometimes, especially since she had Yu-jie. She suspects that I’m keeping a mistress outside.”

“Women are like that—suspicious by nature. Their minds wander when they’re sitting at home with nothing to do. Cut her some slack.” Xiahou Lian grinned. “Having someone to wait for you is nice. Don’t listen to the guys who say the single life gives you more freedom—if they could get married, they would. A home needs to be lively to be a home.”

“Why don’t you marry, then?” Situ Jin asked. “Is it because you’re in love with the chief?”

Xiahou Lian didn’t answer right away. Was it always the quiet people who said the most terrifying things? “What are you even saying? I’m a man,” he responded, mortified.

“Plenty of men in the capital fool around with male courtesans. I know several who do,” Situ Jin remarked impassively.

“Don’t ever say that in front of the chief,” Xiahou Lian said, rubbing his temple. “He was harassed by men like that as a child. It’s a sore spot for him.”

Situ Jin paused, then said, “I thought he loved you.”

Xiahou Lian said nothing.

Situ Jin frowned slightly. “To be precise,” he added, “I thought you both loved each other.”

Xiahou Lian gave Situ Jin a long, complicated look. Situ Jin’s expression remained neutral, his face as calm as if he’d just commented on nice weather. Finally, Xiahou Lian said, “Situ-laoge, have you been reading too many romance novels with your wife?”

Situ Jin said he hadn’t been. “She doesn’t read romance novels. She usually studies medical texts.”

Then why is his head full of these ideas? Xiahou Lian rubbed his face in frustration. *Do I really look like the kind of guy who’d be into men?* He sighed. “You’re overthinking it. The chief and I are just close friends. We went through a lot together as kids—my mother even taught him swordplay. We’re brothers in hardship, life-and-death companions—you get it, right?” He crossed his arms and grinned easily. “At my age, people seem to expect me to have courted a woman or two—or at least had some fleeting romance. Since I haven’t, it’s easy to mistakenly assume that I’m into men instead. But before, I was far too busy seeking revenge to think about any of that. I wouldn’t know what love even feels like.”

“Love is a very warm feeling,” Situ Jin said, tilting his head up slightly.

“Warm?” Xiahou Lian repeated softly.

Situ Jin nodded. “I was an orphan. I’d been alone for as long as I could remember. I slept in shelters, ruined temples, caves, and even haunted rooms others didn’t dare enter because people had died within them. I’m from the north—the winters there are harsh. The town I lived in was so poor that some families couldn’t even afford charcoal for warmth. But they at

least had family to huddle together with. Not me. I could only wrap my arms around myself. Later, I came to the capital, passed the military exams, earned an official rank, and even bought a small house—but I was still an orphan. I went to work alone, ate alone, and returned to an empty house where I'd sit alone beneath the eaves to watch the moon. I had no one to miss, and no one to miss me. Winters were still just as cold."

"But then you met your wife," Xiahou Lian said.

"Yes." Situ Jin smiled faintly. "Everything changed with Mingyue. Just like you said, love made the house lively. When I came home to hot rice and hot soup, winter wasn't so harsh anymore. Holding each other made it warm, even without charcoal. When I looked at the moon, I had someone to think of, and someone thought of me. Only since meeting Mingyue have I felt that in this vast capital—this vast world—there's a place that belongs to me, because there's a person who belongs to me. She waits for me to come home, waits to eat with me. She's the reason I stand here."

Xiahou Lian watched Situ Jin silently. The hardened man's expression softened when he spoke of the woman named Mingyue, as if his steeliness was melting into tenderness. Even the lines of his face became gentler.

Xiahou Lian chuckled and rested his hands behind his head. "You've got it all wrong, Situ-laoge. That's not love—that's family. I felt that way too when my mother, brother, and master were around…though they never cooked for me."

Situ Jin shook his head. "Your mother and brother shared your blood, so that closeness was innate. And your master watched you grow, taught you skills—he was like a father to you. Mingyue and I are different; we don't share blood. Yet I still want to walk this life with her—a long, unbroken walk. We don't wish to live with our friends for a lifetime. The one you want to stay with forever—that's your spouse."

Xiahou Lian was stunned for a long moment. Wanting to stay together—was that love? He'd never really thought about it. Growing up, he never met a woman he wanted to spend his life with. But now, he was unable to stop himself from wondering: What if it *was* Shen Jue? He thought of Situ Jin's hot rice and soup. He'd never met Situ's wife, but he

knew she must be a gentle woman—perhaps with a lopsided bun and moon-shaped earrings, dressed in a pale-blue blouse and sky-blue skirt. He pictured Situ Jin riding home through the snow and pushing open the door, and that gentle woman would greet him with a smile, asking softly whether he was cold. In Xiahou Lian's daze, the man returning home transformed into himself—and it was Shen Jue there to greet him. *But Shen Jue can't cook!* Xiahou Lian bit his tongue hard and snapped back to reality. He shook his head. "I guess I've never met someone like that."

Situ Jin reached out into the moonlight. "The person you love—they'll be the best person you've ever met. Mingyue is the best woman I've ever known."

Xiahou Lian thought of his own life again. He'd never met any particularly outstanding women—but what about Shen Jue? The guy had the temper of a spoiled young noblewoman—he couldn't sew, cook, or sweep. Marrying him would be like bringing home a Buddha statue to worship. Then again, maybe that wouldn't be so bad. Xiahou Lian could handle the sewing, cooking, and cleaning. If they had money, they could hire servants. He unconsciously recalled Shen Jue's striking brows and eyes, and his heart suddenly skipped a beat.

Outside the cell, the night watchman's clapper sounded once, twice, sharp and rhythmic, jolting him alert. No, no—Shen Jue was a man too. Even if he was a eunuch, he was still a man. How could they marry? Xiahou Lian shook his head violently, trying to chase away his improper thoughts. He glanced at Situ Jin, who gazed at the moon outside the window, probably longing for his wife. After a while, Xiahou Lian decided it would be better not to sleep near Situ Jin. He gathered a pile of straw, spread it on the opposite side of the cell, and lay down. But after tossing and turning for what felt like ages, sleep still wouldn't come.

Finally, he turned his head and asked, "Do you know the chief's plans?"

"I can't say." Situ Jin pointed at the wall, implying that there could be eavesdroppers. "But don't worry. The chief will be fine."

"Mm-hmm," Xiahou Lian muttered, turning back to face the mildew-covered wall. He wasn't actually worried. He just suddenly really wanted to —

He jolted. He suddenly really wanted to see Shen Jue.

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THREE DAYS LATER, Xiahou Lian and Situ Jin were escorted to the Meridian Gate. The air had turned colder, the surrounding trees were stripped bare, and the autumn wind tugged at their clothes as if reluctant to let them go. *I hope Shen Jue dressed warmly enough,* Xiahou Lian thought silently. *Please don't let him catch cold again.*

The Embroidered Uniform Guard and the imperial guards had already fallen into their ranks. In front of them sat the minister of justice, the minister of the Court of Judicial Review, and the left censor-in-chief—three old men in crimson robes with crane patches, their beards streaked with white, their faces stern as they sat stiffly in place. Behind them stood a bright yellow screen through which the faint silhouette of a woman with an elaborate updo and voluminous robes was visible.

"The empress dowager," Xiahou Lian muttered.

Situ Jin nodded. "Don't start panicking later. If they ask whether you're the Wuminggui, deny it even in the face of death."

Just then, Shen Jue arrived. The Embroidered Uniform Guard flanked him, but none dared lay a hand on him. He still wore his gold-embroidered pleated robe and black gauze hat with gilded trim. Xiahou Lian and Situ Jin were kneeling, so they could only see his elegant jawline and a crimson tassel hanging below it.

Xiahou Lian stared at him. Shen Jue's gaze swept past him, and as their eyes briefly met, they both settled slightly, as if their thoughts had aligned. Shen Jue withdrew his gaze and stood tall in the center of those gathered, a natural arrogance evident in his bearing. His straight back, his slender figure, his exquisite features—he was born to be admired. Watching him from afar, Xiahou Lian suddenly understood in a fleeting moment what "longing" tasted like.

Shen Jue bowed to the officials above him, his voice as clear as jade striking stone. “Your guilty subject, Shen Jue, greets you esteemed lords.” He glanced at the screen and bowed again. “Greetings to Her Majesty the empress dowager.”

“No need for formalities,” the empress dowager replied from behind the screen. “I’m just here to observe. Proceed, gentlemen—don’t waste time.”

The officials saluted her. Then the minister of justice, who sat in the center, ordered, “Summon Xu Ruoyu.”

Xiahou Lian stiffened. Xu Ruoyu was alive!

Several guards carried forth a stretcher bearing a prone figure. It was Xu Ruoyu. His legs had been severed at the base of his thighs, leaving only a truncated torso. With difficulty, he rolled off the stretcher, then bowed to the officials.

“This lowly officer, Xu Ruoyu of the Eastern Depot’s Chen Unit, accuses Shen Jue, head of the Directorate of Ceremonial and Eastern Depot, of colluding with the Qiye Garden rebel Wuminggui to murder the prince of Fu, drive the empress mad, and assassinate the late emperor!” Xu Ruoyu spat each word like venom. “For his crimes, Shen Jue deserves to be dismembered by horses, his corpse thrown into the street and left to rot for a hundred days, and his flesh devoured by dogs!”

Chapter 80:
The Crumbling Tower

A SHOCK RAN THROUGH THE HALL at Xu Ruoyu's words. The officials seated below gaped in astonishment, and the room fell deathly silent. Xiahou Lian's heart seized, and he clenched his fists tightly.

"What's wrong?" whispered Situ Jim, who noticed his unusual reaction.

Xiahou Lian shook his head, his gaze fixed intently on Xu Ruoyu at the front of the hall. Sweat drenched Xu Ruoyu's forehead, and his sideburns stuck to his corpse-pale cheeks. He'd rested for only three days after losing both legs, and his body was terribly weak. Two imperial physicians stood outside with medical kits, ready to act if he suddenly collapsed.

Barely managing to suppress his shock, the minister of justice addressed Xu Ruoyu. "Do you understand the severity of the crime of treason? Depot Chief Shen is a man of great merit, the emperor's savior. How could he have conspired to murder the late emperor? Speak the truth of what you know at once!"

Xu Ruoyu glanced at the empress dowager behind the screen, took a deep breath, and said, "My lord, do not rush. Allow this humble official to explain in detail. The late emperor knew for a long time that Wei De was colluding with His Highness the prince of Fu, planning for the prince to force his way into the palace and rebel. He secretly entrusted the imperial decree and his tiger tally to Shen Jue. Yet Shen Jue was ungrateful for the late emperor's trust and repaid his kindness with betrayal. He sought to deceive the prince of Fu into entering the capital with the tiger tally, then accuse him of doing so without imperial permission. However, the prince of Fu encountered a flood on the way to the palace and perished in the middle of the journey.

"Coincidentally, Shen Jue had come across the Wuminggui, a master of bizarre and underhanded techniques, who was especially skilled in disguise and in changing one's face. Shen Jue ordered the Wuminggui to

disguise me, making me impersonate the prince of Fu so that I might enter the capital and join Wei De in storming the palace. During the coup, he had me feign death, which allowed him to execute Wei De for treason. But Shen Jue was not yet satisfied. To ensure His Majesty's ascension, he acted madly, forcing the late emperor to his death, then claiming His Majesty had died of his fury at Wei De and the prince of Fu. He even posed as a hero! If I've spoken a single falsehood, may I be struck by lightning!"

In one breath, Xu Ruoyu finished speaking, and the entire hall gasped in shock. Who could have imagined Shen Jue's audacity?! A eunuch, forcing an emperor to his death! The three elders on the dais paled, their eyes darting to Shen Jue, who remained impassive.

The minister of justice broke into a cold sweat, pulling a handkerchief from his waist to dab at his face. "Your words are but one side of the story," he said, trembling. "Deceiving and killing the late prince of Fu and arranging for the late emperor's death—these would be grave crimes! The punishment for such offenses would go beyond dismemberment by five horses. Even death by a thousand cuts would not suffice. Do you have proof?!"

"Of course! The Eastern Depot's retainer Xiahou Lian, of the Chen Unit, kneels below. He is Qiye Garden's Wuminggui. As everyone knows, the Wuminggui uses puppets as instruments of murder. Just yesterday, the Embroidered Uniform Guard found the puppet Zhaoye in his home. The esteemed lords need only look to see."

At that, two Embroidered Uniform Guards carried Zhaoye into the hall. The exquisite puppet stood indifferently under the daylight, its white porcelain mask reflecting a cold sheen. Its right blade-arm had been completely destroyed, leaving only the remnants of its left arm. The blade glinted beneath its wide sleeve; it exuded a chilling bloodthirstiness.

The officials in the hall stared fixedly at Zhaoye; even the Embroidered Uniform Guards' eyes betrayed curiosity. The puppet Zhaoye had long been renowned, but other than its unfortunate victims, few had ever seen it up close. Now that they did, they marveled in astonishment.

The minister of justice's gaze swept to Xiahou Lian. "Xiahou Lian, do you confess?"

Xiahou Lian stepped forward. “This humble official does not confess. Please judge wisely, my lord. The chief has hunted Garden rebels for years, uncovering countless secret bases—including the Wuminggui’s private lair, where Zhaoye was seized. I’m an unskilled man, but I know a handful of forging techniques. The chief merely brought me Zhaoye so I could examine it—it’s not mine!”

From behind him, Situ Jin added, “If my lord doubts this, he may inspect the Eastern Depot’s records. Every such confiscation is documented.”

The minister of justice pondered briefly. “I’ve heard that the Eastern Depot has a portrait of the Wuminggui. Let us see it.”

Xu Ruoyu tried to speak, but pain flared in his knees, draining more color from his face. The minister of justice waved, and the Embroidered Uniform Guard brought Xu Ruoyu a low stool to sit on. Catching his breath, Xu Ruoyu said, “My lord may not realize this, but the Wuminggui has somehow altered his appearance—he no longer looks as he once did. However, Shen Jue did once instigate him to disguise me as the prince of Fu, after His Highness drowned in the flood. That’s how I was able to enter the capital and storm the palace. I still have the human-skin mask—please examine it, my lords.”

Xu Ruoyu removed the mask resembling the prince of Fu from his robes and presented it to the Embroidered Uniform Guard, who passed it to the three elders. They huddled together, scrutinizing the mask. It was as soft as human skin, and it indeed looked like the prince of Fu. They exchanged glances, then passed it down for other officials to inspect. Whispers arose.

“How do you explain this, Xiahou Lian?” the minister of justice asked gravely.

“I’ve never seen this human-skin mask before,” Xiahou Lian replied.

“Perhaps, in order to falsely accuse the chief, Xu Ruoyu had a wandering sorcerer craft the mask!” someone interjected.

Xu Ruoyu gritted his teeth. “Let my lord summon all the retainers from the Chen unit. Every one of them was present during the pursuit of the prince of Fu. And summon the Eastern Depot’s chief archivist, Situ Jin—

they are all accomplices! Torture them, and they will surely speak the truth!”

The officials nodded. To hear the truth, torture would indeed be necessary.

Just when the minister of justice was about to order the Embroidered Uniform Guard to bring out the instruments, Shen Jue took a few steps forward. “Clearly, I am the main suspect in this case, yet you fixate on Xiahou Lian without questioning me first. Why?”

The minister of justice smiled awkwardly. “You’re right, Chief. If you have grievances, please state them.”

Shen Jue glanced at Xu Ruoyu, who immediately lowered his head. Shen Jue’s gaze was light but cold as winter ice, sending a chill through Xu Ruoyu’s body. Shen Jue looked away, smirking. “I’ve long wondered about this. I treated you well, Xu Ruoyu. Back when you were adrift in the jianghu and drowning in debt, your sixty-year-old mother had been trapped in her home by debt collectors. It was I who gave you a chance at life by repaying your debts and promoting you to the Eastern Depot. You once swore you’d repay me with your very life. Now, it seems you’ve forgotten that and instead become a rabid dog biting at random.”

Xu Ruoyu’s hands trembled as he slowly bowed, pressing his head to the ground in deference to Shen Jue. “This humble official could never forget the great kindness the chief has shown me. But the chief has now committed grave crimes, and I will not aid a tyrant! I shall repay the chief’s kindness in the next life.”

“I dare not accept such repayment.” Shen Jue chuckled, then continued. “Later, I sent men to investigate your home. That’s when everything became clear.”

Xu Ruoyu froze.

Shen Jue clapped twice and called, “Bring in Lady Xu!”

A eunuch led an old woman through the crowd. Clutching a handkerchief, she spotted Xu Ruoyu on the ground and threw herself toward him, wailing, “My son! My son, what has happened to you?”

Xu Ruoyu’s eyes reddened at the sight of her. “Mother!”

Behind the screen, the empress dowager clenched her fists, digging her nails into her palms.

“What is this…?” the left censor-in-chief asked uncertainly.

“What happened in the past few days, Lady? Tell the truth to the lords,” Shen Jue said slowly, his hands behind his back.

The old woman wiped her tears and sobbed, “I was tending flowers at home one day when someone covered my mouth and nose. They abducted me to some unknown place. It looked like…a manor. They confined me to a room and wouldn’t let me move freely. When I asked who they were and why they’d taken me, they wouldn’t answer—they just told me to stay put. I was frantic, but what could I do? An old woman like me can barely walk. Thankfully, just two days ago, the chief sent his men to rescue me, and I was freed.”

The minister of justice was stunned. “You were kidnapped?!”

“Unfortunately, the kidnappers were desperate men,” explained Shen Jue. “When my men captured them, they bit off their tongues and died.” He smiled coldly at Xu Ruoyu. “So you’ll have to tell us who they were, Xu Ruoyu.”

“I-I…” Xu Ruoyu stared at Shen Jue, drenched in cold sweat.

“Xu Ruoyu, do you think you and your mother will survive after falsely accusing the chief?” Situ Jin whispered from behind, “Ask your mother how she fared over those days.”

The old woman wept and shook her head. “I was starved—I wasn’t allowed to speak, just left hungry.” She burst into fresh tears at the sight of Xu Ruoyu’s legs. “My son, what sin have we committed?!”

From behind the screen, the empress dowager suddenly snapped, “Xu Ruoyu, think carefully before you speak!”

Xu Ruoyu fell silent, his face turning ashen. After a long pause, he abruptly broke free from his mother’s embrace and crawled to Shen Jue’s feet, tears streaming. “As the lords see, my mother was taken hostage in order to force me to falsely accuse the chief. Everything I said earlier was a lie, every word of it instigated by—by Her Majesty the empress dowager!”

“The empress dowager?!” exclaimed the minister of justice.

Xu Ruoyu turned and kowtowed to Shen Jue. “Chief, I know I’ve betrayed you, and now the empress dowager as well—there’s no way out for me! I beg the chief, in recognition of my past service, to protect my mother! I will atone…with my death!”

With that, Xu Ruoyu convulsed and collapsed. The old woman shrieked and threw herself over him. Blood trickled from his mouth as she turned him over. He had bitten off his tongue.

The hall erupted in shock. The three elders on the dais couldn’t bear to look, and Xiahou Lian turned aside, grimacing. The Embroidered Uniform Guard swiftly removed Xu Ruoyu’s body and led the old woman away.

Behind the screen, the empress dowager trembled with rage. Her hands shook as she accepted the hot tea Zhuxia offered her, but after a few sips, she managed to steady herself. “My lords,” she said calmly, “Xu Ruoyu first accused the chief of treason, then claimed I framed him—all within a few moments. Such inconsistency makes him untrustworthy. I believe all his words were lies. The meritorious way the chief saved the emperor is known to all, as is his support of the young sovereign. As the emperor’s mother, what reason could I have to falsely accuse the chief?” Behind the screen, she turned toward Shen Jue and smiled. “Don’t you agree, Chief?”

Shen Jue twisted the ring on his thumb, his smile devoid of warmth. The empress dowager was certainly quick to adapt. Having lost her advantage, she now sought to reconcile with him. But Shen Jue was no pushover. “Your Majesty needn’t rush,” he said slowly. “This case isn’t over. The matter of my bombardment of Guangling Temple remains unresolved. Why not settle it now, my lords?”

“I see no need for that!” the empress dowager said hastily. “The chief wouldn’t bombard an imperial temple without cause, so he must have had a good reason! After this trial, he can report that reason privately to the emperor and me. Why trouble the lords further?”

The officials shook their heads. The left censor-in-chief bowed to the empress dowager and said, “Your Majesty is mistaken. Guangling Temple houses the late emperor’s memorial tablet, so this matter concerns Great Qi’s welfare. It’s best that we settle it here.”

The empress dowager's hand fell limply to her lap; her face was ashen. Shen Jue's willingness to address the matter now could only mean that he was prepared. The game was lost.

Shen Jue clapped again, and Eastern Depot agents dragged in a bloodied man, then threw him to the ground. Disheveled and covered in filth, he was unrecognizable until an agent lifted his hair to reveal his face. It was commander of the imperial guard Wan Bohai.

The officials stood in shock. "Lord Wan!"

"Spare me…spare me…" Wan Bohai gasped, crawling toward Shen Jue and reaching for his robes. Shen Jue stepped back with a trace of a frown.

"Spare me, Chief," Wan Bohai mumbled. "It was me, all me. I conspired[16] with the empress dowager. She ordered me to besiege Guangling Temple and send the imperial guard to assassinate you… Please spare my life…"

His voice was soft, but everyone heard it—the word "conspired," in particular, pierced their ears like needless. The officials gaped at the empress dowager behind the screen. A crisp clatter like cracking ice came from beyond it—the sound of the empress's teacup shattering against the ground.

"A confession extracted under torture cannot be trusted!" the empress dowager hissed, gnashing her teeth. "His words are worthless!"

"Wan Bohai, Her Majesty claims that you're slandering her," said Shen Jue. He looked down at Wan Bohai with an indifferent smile. His eyes were dark and shadowed, countless demons lurking within their depths.

Under that gaze, Wan Bohai shivered. "I'm not lying, I swear!" he shouted. "The empress dowager—she has a peach-shaped birthmark on the left cheek of her buttocks! Have the palace matrons check! On the left—the left!"

"Let me ask you one more thing," Shen Jue continued leisurely. "Who was behind the Yao family incident?"

"The empress dowager," answered Wan Bohai. "It was all her doing! She wanted you killed, Chief! It was her!"

Silence fell. Regardless of whether the Yao deaths were truly the empress dowager's doing, Wan Bohai's knowledge of such an intimate mark left little doubt as to the truth of their illicit affair. This was a royal scandal—it should never have been aired in public. The officials clamped their mouths shut, not daring to utter a word. The three elders on the dais exchanged awkward glances, staring at one another like squabbling roosters.

Finally, Shen Jue spoke. "This is the truth. The empress dowager first framed me for the deaths of Lady Yao and her son, then ordered Wan Bohai to trap me in Guangling Temple during the incense ceremony. To protect myself, I had no choice but to call reinforcements from the Divine Mechanisms Camp. Moreover, shedding blood in a sacred Buddhist temple is grave sacrilege. Her actions are an affront to heaven itself!"

Bombarding the temple was surely an affront to heaven as well, of course, but nobody dared say so. The situation was clear: The empress dowager had been utterly defeated, and Shen Jue stood triumphant. Anyone foolish enough to oppose him now would court death.

The minister of justice wiped away some sweat. His handkerchief was already half-soaked. Weighing his words, he declared, "The matter of the empress dowager must be handed over to the Imperial Clan Court. We shall leave it to the chief's discretion."

Shen Jue nodded. Matters of the inner palace were indeed under his jurisdiction.

The screen moved aside, and the empress dowager stepped out. Her face was so pale in the sunlight it seemed almost translucent, as if she might vanish at any moment. She descended step by step and walked past Shen Jue, who bowed slightly and made way for her.

"Your reach is truly boundless, Chief Shen," she said. "Your schemes are flawless."

"Your Majesty flatters me," Shen Jue replied. "I merely have luck on my side."

"I thought I could defeat you."

Shen Jue chuckled. "You forgot what I taught you, Your Majesty—never strike unless victory is certain." His gaze darkened. "But once you

strike, you must weed out every last root, eradicating future troubles."

The empress dowager swayed slightly. Zhuxia steadied her, tears in her own eyes.

The empress dowager took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "Very well. In that case, I congratulate you, Chief Shen. May you reap what you've sown!"

The eunuchs of the Imperial Clan Court led her away.

The matter seemed to have concluded, and Xiahou Lian let out a quiet sigh of relief and glanced at Shen Jue, who happened to look back at the same moment. Their eyes met, and for no reason, Xiahou Lian's ears began to burn. He coughed awkwardly and gestured outside, signaling that he would await Shen Jue there. Shen Jue nodded his understanding.

As everyone prepared to leave, the minister of the Court of Judicial Review, who had remained silent until then, suddenly spoke. "Wait! Though Shen Jue did not murder the late emperor, and though his bombardment of Guangling Temple may have been justified, it remains true that he once colluded with Wei De to manipulate official appointments and abuse his power. Now he's formed his own faction with treasonous intent, leading His Majesty astray with frivolity. He alienates those who are loyal and embraces treachery. Shouldn't he also be tried for that?!"

Xiahou Lian stiffened. Turning, he saw Shen Jue and the minister of the Court of Judicial Review lock gazes across the hall. An invisible storm seemed to be brewing between them.

"His Majesty ordered this joint tribunal to investigate the charge of treason that had been made against me," Shen Jue replied unhurriedly. "If you wish to impeach me, submit a memorial to the throne."

The minister of the Court of Judicial Review sneered. A memorial to the throne? The vermilion endorsements were all Shen Jue's doing. The ten-year-old emperor could barely hold a brush—what would he care? "You have thrown the court into chaos and defiled its conventions!" the minister cried. "Nowadays in Great Qi, people speak only of Shen Jue and not of the emperor. That is tantamount to treason, and thus, it's within our jurisdiction to put you on trial!"

Chapter 81:
Autumn's Late Bloom

"WHAT'S HAPPENING?" Xiahou Lian whispered to Situ Jin.

Situ Jin's expression was grim. "The Qingliu faction is making their move. The minister of the court of Judicial Review is with them, not the empress dowager."

Xiahou Lian's heart sank. The Qingliu and eunuch factions had been at odds for years; their clashes had been furious even during Wei De's reign. At one point, the Qingliu faction had flooded the throne with impeachment memorials against Wei De, although the late emperor had ignored them all. Enraged, Wei De retaliated by having the Eastern Depot conduct purges—one censor who'd submitted ten accusations against Wei De was tortured to death within its walls.

Shen Jue had been Wei De's favored subordinate in those days and had helped him arrest a number of officials, so the eunuchs' enmity with the Qingliu faction ran deep. Now that Shen Jue had replaced Wei De, the faction had turned their spears on him. The Yao family case and Guangling Temple ambush clearly hadn't been solely the empress dowager's schemes—the Qingliu faction had played a part as well.

Xiahou Lian frowned. "Is the chief prepared?"

Situ Jin shook his head slightly. "I don't know."

Shen Jue adjusted his robes and smiled coldly. "On trial? The empress dowager was one thing: She is the emperor's mother. Dealing with her required effort. But *you*?" His expression sharpened, thunder gathering in his eyes. "Who among you dares to try me?!"

"Outrageous!" the minister of the Court of Judicial Review roared. "You are just a eunuch! As righteous officials of the court, we have every right to try you!"

"Do not defy the will of the realm, Chief Shen," the left censor-in-chief added sternly. "Submit to judgment."

“Righteous officials? Let’s take a look at your so-called purity!” Shen Jue’s lips curled mockingly. Rather than starting with the minister of the Court of Judicial Review, he turned to the left censor-in-chief. “Censor, the court knows that you come from wealth—your family owns vast estates in Songjiang. But none in court know that half of your family’s lands were seized from impoverished peasants. As a high-ranking official, the Songjiang magistrate turned a blind eye to your encroachments. Those whose land you stole pleaded in vain, reduced to vagrants. When one of your victims, Tian Danin, starved to death in the streets, you paid to have his body dumped in a mass grave. Am I wrong?”

The left censor-in-chief paled, sweat pouring down his forehead. “Sl-slander! Do not smear my name!”

Ignoring him, Shen Jue bowed slightly to the minister of the Court of Judicial Review. “As for you, sir—you are indeed upright and incorruptible. Your conduct is beyond reproach. Unfortunately, your household is not so disciplined. Last month, your son’s horse kicked an eighty-year-old man in the chest. The old man died that very night. By law, that life should have been repaid, but your wife was quite resourceful—she bribed everyone, including the victim’s family, to sweep the matter under the rug. Very beneficial for you—still, that old man tragically lost his life!”

The minister of the Court of Judicial Review gaped, speechless.

Shen Jue feigned surprise. “What? Didn’t you know?”

The minister gritted his teeth. “You…you’re spouting nonsense!”

Shen Jue smirked. “If you think I lie, have your son and wife brought before the courts. We shall see whether you’re willing to let your only son pay with his life.”

The minister of the Court of Judicial Review slumped in his seat.

The hall fell silent. As the saying went, “crystal clear water breeds no fish”—who among them could claim a spotless record? Even if a particular person was clean, their family might not be. The Eastern Depot’s reach was long; they could even retrieve dice lost during an official’s illicit gambling sessions and present them to the emperor. Unearthing such secrets was child’s play to the Eastern Depot, and yet the minister of the Court of Judicial Review had stubbornly charged into Shen Jue’s line of fire.

Shen Jue's gaze shifted to the minister of justice, who hastily raised his hands. "This had nothing to do with me, Chief! This was an open-and-shut case: The empress dowager framed you. Now I have urgent matters at home, so I must take my leave!"

He fled, and other officials quickly followed. Shen Jue stood alone amid the dispersing crowd, his golden mask of triumph falling away to expose icy detachment. "Well, my lord? Do you still wish to try me?" he asked coldly.

The minister of the Court of Judicial Review felt his throat tighten. He slowly removed his official's hat and clutched it to his chest. "You win, Chief Shen. Tomorrow, I shall resign and return to my hometown, never to set foot in court again."

"In that case, I bid you farewell," Shen Jue said with a proper bow.

The man stormed off. Shen Jue straightened, closed his eyes, and inhaled deeply. Exhaustion washed over him, like a swarm of insects crawling through his veins. He had barely slept for days preparing for today's battle. The crowd flowed around him like a receding tide, and none dared meet his eyes. He'd toppled the empress dowager and crushed the Qingliu faction, and the ten-year-old Emperor was a mere puppet. Shen Jue stood unrivaled, his power second only to that of the throne itself. Yet his heart felt hollow, like an empty drum echoing with each beat. Why? He was the victor—the sole victor.

"Shaoye," Xiahou Lian's voice pulled him from his thoughts. He looked up into the other man's dark, steady eyes. "Let's go home," Xiahou Lian said softly.

Shen Jue lowered his lashes, his smile weary. "Yes—home."

As they turned to leave, an aged voice called out from behind them. "Does *this* old man have the right to try you, Chief Shen?!"

Shen Jue stopped in his tracks, And the smile on his face stiffened.

Xiahou Lian turned, along with the crowd, to see a hunched old man shuffle in with a cane. The old man was pitifully thin, his skeletal frame barely filling out his official robes. The garments fluttered emptily in the wind, hanging loosely on his body, like clothes on a rack.

Xiahou Lian froze. Twelve years of hardship had aged this man far beyond his real years; his face now unrecognizable—yet Xiahou Lian knew him at once.

It was Dai Shengyan. Dai-xiansheng.

Instinctively, Xiahou Lian turned to look at Shen Jue. The man stood in the open wind, his head bowed. His face was shadowed and unreadable, but for some reason, his silhouette seemed full of a desolate chill. The confidence possessed by the strategist of moments earlier had vanished, leaving behind only an impression of frigid, bone-deep solitude.

“Dai-xiansheng, you’ve come!” The minister of the Court of Judicial Review hurried forward to assist him.

“No need, no need.” Dai Shengyan waved a hand. “My bones are old, but my legs still work. Apologies for keeping you all waiting.”

The old man moved as slowly as a snail toward the seat of honor, passing right by Shen Jue. Shen Jue kept his gaze fixed on the hem of Dai Shengyan’s robes. The vibrant embroidered waves and cliffs on the panels over his knees were dazzling.

Xiahou Lian brushed Shen Jue’s hand and felt his icy fingers, totally devoid of warmth. “Don’t be afraid, Shaoye.”

“I’m not afraid,” Shen Jue replied hoarsely.

“If Dai-xiansheng tries to strike you, I’ll grab you and run.”

“Idiot,” Shen Jue said, pressing a hand to his temple. “Stand aside. Don’t speak unless I tell you to.”

Finally reaching his destination, the old man leaned his cane against the yellow pearwood table, then gripped the table’s edges with both bony hands and lowered himself into the seat. His joints creaked with the movement, as though he might collapse at any moment. After taking a moment to catch his breath, he pulled a memorial from his sleeve, unfolded it section by section, and laid it flat on the table. Only then did he lift his head to speak.

“This old man has always strived to uphold integrity,” he said in a measured tone. “Though I dare not claim to have served with perfect dedication, I have never committed any grave misconduct. Though I am

now retired, the late emperor honored me with the title of ‘junior guardian of the heir apparent.’ Today, I presume to overstep my bounds and adjudicate this case.” His gaze settled on Shen Jue. “Depot Chief Shen, am I guilty of any hidden misdeeds that will disqualify me from judging you?”

Silence filled the hall. All eyes turned to Shen Jue, standing in the wind. Officials loyal to the Qingliu faction exchanged covert smiles. Dai Shengyan was an anomaly in the court, having never sought to form a faction, nor followed trends. Early in his career, he’d had no notable achievements; instead, his fame stemmed from his scholarship, which had been revered by Confucian scholars of the time. Later, Dai Shengyan had become the late emperor’s teacher. After the massacre of the Xie family, however, Dai Shengyan became inexplicably fixated on opposing Wei De’s faction. For three days and nights, he struck the drum of grievances[17] outside the palace, kneeling before the gates to accuse Wei De of twenty-four crimes.

He was a thorn in Wei De’s side. Still, Dai Shengyan’s close ties to the late emperor and sterling reputation—as well as the mysterious martial artists who protected him—made him untouchable. Over the years, countless people had attempted to impeach Wei De, but Dai Shengyan alone survived unscathed.

Shen Jue forced a smile and bowed deeply. “Your virtue is beyond reproach, Xiansheng. This humble official has nothing to criticize.”

“Good,” replied Dai Shengyan. He lowered his head, tracing the deep-set ink strokes on the aged memorial, which had clearly been written years ago. “Years ago, I accused Wei De of twenty-four crimes. For three days and nights, I beat the drum of grievances and knelt before the palace. Each crime, in and of itself, could have shattered Wei De to pieces, should he be found culpable. But the twenty-fourth was especially severe: colluding with Qiye Garden rebels to slaughter the Xie family of Jinling. That massacre claimed over a hundred lives, including that of Censor Xie Bingfeng, his wife Lady Xie, their sons Jingtao, Jingtan, and…” His voice faltered momentarily. “…and my youngest disciple, Xie Jinglan. All met tragic ends.”

A murmur of sympathy rippled through the crowd.

“Yet the late emperor turned a blind eye, shielding Wei De despite universal condemnation,” Dai Shengyan continued. “Eunuch Shen, you merit praise for executing Wei De, but you participated in nearly every one of his crimes. Now that you’re the head of the Directorate of Ceremonial, your duties lie within the inner court—you shouldn’t interfere in external affairs. Yet you follow in Wei De’s footsteps, dismantling the political system our ancestors established and leading His Majesty astray with frivolity. Of Wei De’s twenty-four offenses, you’ve committed twenty-three in full. Given your erudition, you must know those crimes. Shall I recite them for you as well?”

Shen Jue closed his eyes briefly. “No need.”

Dai Shengyan nodded. “In that case, Chief Shen, do you confess?”

Xiahou Lian’s heart lurched, his brows knitting tightly.

Shen Jue didn’t move or speak. He stared at his own shadow on the ground; for a fleeting moment, that shadow seemed to shrink, transforming into the scrawny silhouette of a twelve-year-old boy. Shen Jue remembered standing like this in Wangqing Pavilion, answering Dai-xiansheng’s questions. Back then, he had postured, pretending to be unshakable, clinging to hollow pride—but Dai Shengyan had seen right through him.

He knew that Dai Shengyan had knelt and beaten a drum before the palace gates. While the old man kneeling outside had begged for an audience with the late emperor, Shen Jue stood behind the glazed doors, eyes on his teacher’s frail figure under the sun, a solitary twig that could snap with a touch. He’d wondered then why the old man was so foolish. Xie Bingfeng was a hypocrite, and Xie Jinglan had only been Dai Shengyan’s disciple for a few months. Why fight Wei De to the bitter end for the likes of them? Dead was dead.

Now, exhaustion crushed Shen Jue, more suffocating than ever. For the first time, he wanted to flee far away, somewhere Dai-xiansheng could never find him. Yet the gloomy daylight pinned him in place: In that light, he was a ghost left exposed, with nowhere to hide and no one to hear his pleas.

As he opened his mouth to speak, Dai Shengyan suddenly said, “Since this tribunal began, Chief Shen, you have yet to lift your head and look at me. Have I not the right to see your face?”

Xiahou Lian stepped forward, ready to speak, but Shen Jue pulled him back. Xiahou Lian struggled, but Shen Jue's grip was ironclad, his fingers clenched around Xiahou Lian's sleeve.

"Please," Shen Jue whispered, his voice raspy. "Don't."

Xiahou Lian stilled.

Shen Jue slowly raised his head. His smile earlier had vanished—he couldn't even feign one now. His pale face was devoid of emotion, frozen like frost save for his eyes—they were steeped in wintry sorrow, making him look lonely as a solitary swan.

Dai Shengyan stiffened. The young man before him had delicate features, and his underlying bone structure bore an uncanny resemblance to that of the stubborn boy from his memories. He thought, for a fleeting moment, that the boy hadn't died after all—that he was alive, standing before Dai Shengyan now, meeting his gaze. "Chief Shen…you look familiar. Are you by any chance related to the Xie family of Jinling?" Dai Shengyan asked, frowning deeply.

"No," said Shen Jue.

Pain flickered in Dai Shengyan's eyes. "A coincidence, then." He sighed heavily. "Regarding those twenty-three crimes—do you confess?"

"I…" Shen Jue's voice was hoarse.

The hall was deathly silent as everyone awaited his answer. In that moment, Shen Jue was no longer the formidable, silver-tongued head of the Directorate of Ceremonial—just a lost boy drowning in icy sorrow.

Then, in the stillness, Xiahou Lian suddenly roared, "No, he doesn't!"

His words were like an arrow shattering silence; the crowd gasped.

"Who gave you the right to speak?" roared the minister of the Court of Judicial Review. "Step back!"

Xiahou Lian fell to his knees on the ground. "Xiansheng, the left censor-in-chief seized others' lands! The minister of the Court of Judicial Review's son took a life! If we scoured the Eastern Depot's records and exposed every official's secrets, not a single man in this court would prove innocent! Why judge only my chief, not the others?"

The assembled officials flushed crimson, shouting in anger. “Outrageous!”

“You’re the outrageous ones!” Xiahou Lian bellowed, veins bulging on his forehead. “If my chief is to be judged, then every last one of you should be!”

Chapter 82:
A Promise Kept

"NOT A SINGLE MAN in this court would prove innocent…" Dai Shengyan let out a bitter laugh. "Well said! How has our world—our court—fallen into such a state? The founding emperor's spirit in the heavens must be weeping in grief!"

The assembled officials looked uneasy. "Lord Dai?!"

Dai Shengyan waved a hand to silence them and continued, "Even so, the state has its laws, and the court its rules. Today's tribunal is for Shen Jue alone. To judge the others, the Court of Judicial Review will have to petition His Majesty for an edict, then convene anew."

"And if the Court refuses to petition His Majesty, will no one be judged?" Xiahou Lian pressed.

"On the contrary," Dai Shengyan's expression was solemn. "But for every day the court delays, I will remain in the capital. And just as I once proposed Wei De's impeachment, I'll propose we impeach every guilty official. Thus, Chief Shen, I must judge you as well!"

The moment these words left his mouth, the hall erupted in panic. Faces paled; men exchanged stunned glances, speechless. Even the minister of the Court of Judicial Review was ashen. "Xiansheng, do you mean to oppose the entire court single-handedly?"

Dai Shengyan smiled faintly. "I am old. A dying man has little use for his life."

There was silence.

Nobody had expected that summoning Dai Shengyan to judge Shen Jue would implicate them *all*. The officials stared dumbly at the frail but stern-looking old man seated at the dais—unyielding as a gnarled pine and fearless beneath heaven.

Xiahou Lian clenched his fists, teeth grinding. Was there truly no way out for Shen Jue? Was judgment inevitable? How could this be?

In the silence, Shen Jue's voice came from behind, soft as a feather. "A-Lian, step back."

Step back? How could he? Instead, Xiahou Lian abruptly straightened and addressed Dai Shengyan. "Lord Dai!"

"Silence!" Shen Jue snapped at him. "Step back!"

Xiahou Lian laughed bitterly. "Certain things have to be faced sooner or later, don't they, Shaoye?"

Shen Jue stiffened and squeezed his eyes shut, saying nothing.

"You were wrong about something earlier, Lord Dai," Xiahou Lian pressed on. "My chief is, in fact, connected to that twenty-fourth offense."

Dai Shengyan frowned slightly. "What do you mean?"

Murmurs rose from the crowd. "Is he insane? What would the Xie family massacre have to do with Shen Jue? That was twelve years ago—Shen Jue would only have been twelve!"

"Exactly! He'd only just entered the palace back then—Wei De didn't even know him!" someone else replied. "Is this guy trying to help or harm him?"

The words "Shen Jue would only have been twelve" pierced through the whispers and struck Dai Shengyan's ears. His heart lurched. "What did you say?" he asked, alarmed. "How old was Shen Jue then?"

"My lord." Xiahou Lian's voice slow and deliberate. "The chief is the Xie family's third son, Xie Jinglan."

It was as if thunder struck. Dai Shengyan trembled violently, his gaze slowly shifting to where Shen Jue stood beside Xiahou Lian. The young man stood in the hall in the rustling autumn wind, his waist cinched by an ornate belt, his shoulders embroidered with coiling pythons. Though he was draped in resplendent silks, the frost in his brow and the sorrow in his eyes couldn't be concealed. Of course it was him. How could any two people look so much alike? The stubborn, lonely boy from Dai Shengyan's memories overlapped with the man before him. His brilliant little disciple wasn't dead after all—he'd clawed his way out of hell to become the all-powerful head of the Directorate of Ceremonial and Eastern Depot: Shen Jue.

Dai Shengyan trembled as he pushed himself up, gasping for breath. “You…you…”

The entire hall erupted in shock.

“How is this possible?!” Everyone’s eyes were wide, their faces full of disbelief.

Shen Jue watched the old man slowly, painstakingly shuffle down the steps toward him. Deep wrinkles crisscrossed his teacher’s aged face like ravines. His white hair was tucked beneath his hairnet, but a few silver strands dangled, almost translucent in the daylight.

The old man stood before Shen Jue, scrutinizing every inch of his face as if searching for traces of the past. His desolate gaze pierced Shen Jue’s heart like an invisible arrow.

He’d hidden for so many years, and in the end, he still hadn’t been able to escape. He felt like a ghost who, afraid of light and people, had fled into the underworld: One day, he would have to return to the mortal world, disintegrating under the sun and the gaze of those who’d once known him, vanishing without a trace.

Now that moment had come, as if destined.

Shen Jue lowered his eyes. “There is no Xie Jinglan.” His voice was hoarse, as if full of countless grains of sand. “Your disciple is dead, Lord Dai. I am only Shen Jue, the criminal you wish to judge.”

“Shaoye!” Xiahou Lian shouted in despair.

Dai Shengyan looked down to where Xiahou Lian knelt on the ground. “And you… Who are you?” he asked, trembling.

“Xiahou Lian! It’s me, Xiansheng—Xiahou Lian!” He turned and pressed his forehead to the ground at Dai Shengyan’s feet. “Twelve years ago, Wei De hired assassins from Qiye Garden to slaughter the Xie family. The chief alone survived, and with no one left to turn to, he traveled north from Nanjing. He nearly starved to death on the street. Back then, Wei De held absolute power. Even you—a renowned Confucian scholar with countless disciples, who leveled twenty-four accusations and beat the grievance drum, could not bring him to justice! How could Xie Jinglan’s blood debt be repaid if not by following the enemy as a father?”

Dai Shengyan trembled, tears streaming down his face. He grasped Shen Jue's arms, his voice thick with grief and fury. "Why didn't you come to me, Jinglan?! At the very least, I could have sheltered you!"

Xiahou Lian answered for him. "The Garden assassins were watching—if the chief had sought you out, he would've brought death to your doorstep! Xiansheng, you are a scholar with no physical strength whatsoever—how could you have staved off the assassins hunting him across thousands of miles?" Xiahou Lian's words were like drops of blood, each syllable heavy with anguish. "Xiansheng, advancing meant death, retreating meant death—plunging into the abyss was the only way for him to survive. In his shoes, what would you have done? I, Xiahou Lian, dare ask you this: Where in this vast world is there pure goodness without sin? Where is there absolute righteousness untainted by evil? If one cannot be perfectly good or eternally righteous, does one deserve to die?!"

Silence.

No one could have imagined that the Eastern Depot's ruthless, cunning chief had once been the scion of a noble Confucian family. No one could have fathomed the sea of blood and hatred he carried on his shoulders. Many in the hall had once served alongside Xie Bingfeng: They'd shared banquets and entertainment, imbibing wine and then addressing one other as sworn brothers. Under different circumstances, Shen Jue would have called these men—his seniors—"uncle."

In the stillness, Shen Jue slowly knelt. He untied the ribbon beneath his chin, removed his black gauze hat with its curved, gold-trimmed brim, and placed it beside him. Then, bowing low, he pressed his head to the ground. He said nothing and simply knelt there, the shadows of his elbows obscuring his face. No one could see his expression. Yet, inexplicably, everyone felt the iron weight of sorrow weighing on his shoulders. It was like a frost covering his entire body, desolate and pitiful.

Dai Shengyan was overcome with grief. He lowered his eyes and wept. "In all my life, I have never committed any great wrong except toward one person. I promised that youth a sliver of peace and swore to protect him, yet I let him face the massacre of his family alone. Then one misstep led to another—he wandered the streets, entered the palace as a

eunuch, bowed to the enemy as a father. Did he not stray onto that dark path because of my failure? What right do I have to judge him?”

Dai Shengyan looked down at the two young men, bowing deeply in the dust, motionless. With a bitter laugh, Dai Shengyan turned, took a few steps, and leaned against the table edge. It was as if he’d aged decades in an instant. He was old to begin with, but everyone suddenly realized he wasn’t just old—he was dying. His frail back hunched farther and farther until he slid down the table leg.

“Lord Dai!” everyone cried.

Members of the Embroidered Uniform Guard rushed forward to catch him. The imperial physicians waiting outside to assist Xu Ruoyu hurried in to check Dai Shengyan’s pulse. The scene before the Meridian Gate descended into chaos. Shen Jue wanted to step forward to see Dai Shengyan, but the crowd separated him from the dying old man. The throng of people was akin to the mountains and rivers Shen Jue crossed over all these years, finally confining him and his teacher to different worlds, never to meet again.

The Embroidered Uniform Guards carried Dai Shengyan to a carriage and took him back to the small residence he rented in the capital. The house was tucked away in a quiet alley, a one-person household with faded blessings pasted on the door and tattered couplets about spring hanging on the pillars. The officials who’d followed packed the courtyard and the street outside to await news from the physicians inside.

Shen Jue likewise stood waiting silently beneath the eaves. No one approached him or spoke to him. An empty space naturally formed around him; everyone hung back and acted like they couldn’t see him. In truth, they were no different from him—but as long as they didn’t stand beside Shen Jue, they could still consider themselves noble scholars. They could hold their heads high and stand proudly in the light of the day.

“Shaoye,” Xiahou Lian called softly from behind him.

Shen Jue didn’t respond. He was exhausted—too tired to even speak. Ignoring his thirst and his aching legs, he simply stood there, as if punishing his body might ease the torment in his heart.

The physician emerged to share good news: Xiansheng was fine, simply weary and in need of rest. The crowd gradually dispersed; soon, the courtyard was deserted. Only Shen Jue and Xiahou Lian were left under the eaves, their figures hidden in the shadows like those of two silent ghosts. A grape trellis also stood in the empty yard, its vines withered, a few dried tendrils clinging to the frame. A row of several flowerpots sat against the wall; they were all full of wildflowers of unknown names and varied heights. Some were still blooming, while others had already withered and appeared listless under the dimming sky.

The two men stood there until eventually a young servant of about fourteen or fifteen emerged from inside. Spotting Shen Jue and Xiahou Lian under the eaves, he paused in surprise. “You’re still here?” The boy stared at Shen Jue for a moment, uncertain of his identity—then his eyes suddenly widened. “Young Master, you look…familiar!”

Shen Jue lifted his gaze to meet the boy’s. The servant ducked back inside, returning moments later with a painting. Shen Jue took it and looked closely. The paper was yellowed with age, but the fine brushstrokes clearly depicted a delicate-faced youth in coarse cotton robes reading by lamplight. It was a painting of Xie Jinglan.

“See?” the servant said, putting away the painting. “This portrait is for mourning Jinglan-shige, but doesn’t he look like you? Don’t tell Xiansheng I showed you. Xiansheng carries it everywhere—it’s his most treasured possession.”

Shen Jue’s throat tightened. “How is Xiansheng now?”

“Better, but still resting.” The boy scratched his head and sighed. “Xiansheng’s health has never been good—this isn’t the first time he’s fainted. It’s all their fault, those people who dragged him here from his hometown! At his age, how could he endure such a long journey?”

“May I see him?” Shen Jue asked softly.

“Xiansheng is still asleep…” The boy trailed off, studying Shen Jue for a long moment. Then he suddenly understood, his eyes widening. Still, he said nothing before turning and darting back inside. He soon reappeared at the door and called to Shen Jue and Xiahou Lian. “Xiansheng says you may enter!”

Shen Jue took a deep breath, then stepped forward and crossed the threshold. Xiahou Lian followed silently behind him, never leaving his side.

They walked through the central hall. Open doors on both sides led to side wings. The building was sparsely furnished with just a few tables and chairs; it was almost completely empty. A yellowwood table stood opposite them, topped with an incense burner and plate of fruit; a hook was nailed to the wooden panel above. The portrait of Xie Jinglan had likely been hanging there.

At the front of the hall, Dai Shengyan was already dressed and seated.

Shen Jue and Xiahou Lian knelt and pressed their heads to the floor.

Dai Shengyan exhaled slowly. “Good. Everyone else is finally gone, and it’s just the three of us,” he said, his voice measured. “Xiao-Lian, you are not to speak unless you’re spoken to.”

Xiahou Lian clenched his fists. “Understood.”

“Xie Jinglan!” Dai Shengyan suddenly barked, each syllable as sharp as a blade. “You claim Xie Jinglan is dead—but then who could be kneeling before me now? Does changing your name make you somebody else?!”

Shen Jue shuddered, closing his eyes.

“I ask you this,” Dai Shengyan continued sternly. “In the twenty-ninth year of Qianyuan, Wei De framed Jiang Da, the minister of rites, leading to his exile. On the road, bandits severed the former minister’s limbs, and without treatment, he died. At that time, you were already the chief of the Eastern Depot. Did Wei De have you send Eastern Depot agents to do that?”

Shen Jue gritted his teeth. “Yes.”

“In the thirtieth year of Qianyuan, Censor Zhou Cun was slandered and imprisoned, his collarbones pierced. By the time he was released, he no longer looked human. Was that your doing?!”

“Yes.”

“During the sixth month of that same year, Wei De vented his spite by forging an edict to execute the late emperor’s loyal servant Wang Quan in the Southern Park. Was that your doing?”

“Yes.”

“And when Wei De ordered their deaths, did you plead for mercy? Did you offer a single word on their behalf?”

Shen Jue’s fingertips pressed against the ground, turning white. He took a deep breath and answered, “No.”

Dai Shengyan gazed at Shen Jue kneeling before him and slowly asked his final question. “On the day when Wei De sent a group of thugs to ambush me in Mentougou, a group of chivalrous jianghu warriors appeared out of nowhere to save me. When I asked their names, they said nothing and vanished. Did you send them?”

The room fell silent. The young servant stood just outside the door and stared in at the three men, dumbfounded. In the stillness, he heard the young man on the ground softly whisper his reply.

“Yes.”

Dai Shengyan closed his eyes. A single cloudy tear rolled down his sagging eyelid with a cold, dazzling sparkle. He sighed deeply. “When I took you on as my disciple back at Wangqing Pavilion, I told you that the world is harsh, but one must hold goodness in their heart. I said that because I saw your loneliness and suffering, how others trampled on you, and I feared you would turn down a dark path with no return. Your father was foolish, your stepmother ruthless—your life in the Xie household was unbearable. I pitied your solitude and wanted to take you away, but in the end, I failed. Fate is cruel. Back then, I said you were resolute but too inflexible, destined to become either a great paragon or a great villain. Who knew that my words would come true?” He lowered his head, staring at Shen Jue on the ground, and continued in a grave voice, “Xiao-Lian spoke up for you at the Meridian Gate, Xie Jinglan. Now, I want to hear from you. Why did you do this?”

“To take control of my own fate!” Shen Jue’s words were practically carved into his bones. “Lady Xiao was nothing but an official’s wife, yet she could freely kill my servants and abuse me. Wei De was just the emperor’s slave, yet he slaughtered the entire Xie household, and no one could oppose him! Benevolence couldn’t save me, Xiansheng, and loyalty couldn’t protect me. Only by wielding a blade myself, only by seizing power, could I take revenge. Only then could I control my own fate!”

“Xiao-Lian, do you agree?” Dai Shengyan asked.

“Yes,” Xiahou Lian said. “I do.”

“So you aided a tyrant, colluding with Jinglan in his wicked deeds! I know you are loyal to your master, but that was blind loyalty!” Dai Shengyan sighed heavily. “My child, you say you want to control your own fate—but have you truly grasped it? Is this the fate you sought—befriending those you once despised, committing acts you once scorned? If this is the fate you desired, Jinglan, then I wish you’d never escaped that massacre twelve years ago!”

Shen Jue felt as if his heart had been struck. Pain lanced through him.

He said nothing. The wind from outside swept through the hall, chilling him to the core, like his heart was entombed in ice. He had no words to offer—this was the path he had chosen, the fate he’d embraced. All condemnation, all retribution, was his alone to bear.

Dai Shengyan stood slowly, struggling toward Shen Jue. Finally, with a thud, he knelt before his former student. His gaunt shadow fell over Shen Jue, who looked up in shock at the old man’s disconsolate gaze.

“Xiansheng!” Shen Jue exclaimed.

Xiahou Lian looked up, startled.

“My lectures are not divine edicts nor unbreakable laws—they cannot change anything. Earlier, Xiao-Lian asked me whether pure goodness exists in this world—whether absolute righteousness can be found. I cannot answer. I cannot!” Dai Shengyan placed a hand on Shen Jue’s shoulder, and the young man’s slender frame trembled under his touch. Through tears, Dai Shengyan continued, “But if you do not die, how can I face the innocent souls who perished at your and Wei De’s hands?” Taking a deep breath, he concluded solemnly, “There is only one way. I, Dai Shengyan, shamelessly beg the chief to grant me one request!”

“Speak, Xiansheng,” Shen Jue said hoarsely.

“So long as you hold office, you must do everything in your power to guide the young emperor, cleanse the court, and restore peace to Great Qi! Let no hardship deter you—face a thousand deaths if you must!”

Each word was grating; the sound could have pierced bone. In that moment, it was as if the only sound in all of heaven and earth was his teacher's aged voice, echoing endlessly. Shen Jue raised his eyes with difficulty and met Dai Shengyan's gaze. The old man's expression was as unyielding as ancient pines clinging to a cliff. Shen Jue gripped Dai Shengyan's arm, lowered his eyes, and smiled bitterly. "Very well."

"Do you know the consequences of being a palace eunuch and slave of the emperor, yet siding with officials against His Majesty?"

"I know."

"Do you know what will become of you if the emperor someday tires of your counsel, or if another treacherous eunuch sows discord and you fall from favor?"

"I know."

"Do you know that, however hard you strive, you may never shed your reputation as a villainous eunuch—that people may spit on you and the world abandon you?"

"I know."

Listening to Shen Jue's cold, steady voice, Xiahou Lian suddenly felt overwhelming sorrow. But there was nothing he could do. No one could do anything.

"Good. Good." Dai Shengyan smiled mournfully and extended his palm. "Three strikes to seal the vow."

Shen Jue pressed his lips together and struck Dai Shengyan's withered hand—once, twice, thrice. Each of the crisp claps reverberated in the small room, resolute and unhesitating, echoing far beyond, until they seemed to reach the very end of Shen Jue's life.

After those three strikes, Dai Shengyan looked at the two young men before him with a sorrowful smile. Exhaustion rose from the depths of his being. The daylight suddenly seemed too bright, too dazzling. In that moment, Dai Shengyan felt his fate approach. He reached out and touched Shen Jue's pale cheek. This child had suffered too much; Dai Shengyan understood. He had always understood the boy. That was why Dai Shengyan had acted so selfishly and committed the greatest mistake of his

life. His duty was to uphold the law and condemn Shen Jue, yet he’d let personal affection overrule him, ultimately yielding to his own selfish wishes. How could he send him to die?

This child had such stubborn eyes! Since his boyhood, they had never changed. Even buried in mud, he would fight to lift his head. His pride was unbreakable. Others could trample his body but never his indomitable spirit. Tears streamed down Dai Shengyan's face as he used Shen Jue's arm to push himself up, then gently nudged him toward the door. "Go. Go, my child. Do what you must."

Shen Jue and Xiahou Lian pressed their foreheads to the ground once more before rising and leaving the small courtyard. Looking back, they saw the old man standing in the courtyard's depths. Bit by bit, he shrank, transforming into a dark shadow.

Shen Jue turned away. Leaning against the wall, he walked slowly toward the carriage. Xiahou Lian silently watched Shen Jue's retreating figure. Suddenly, he felt that this narrow alley stretched endlessly, extending into infinity as Shen Jue walked on alone, solitary as a shadow. Xiahou Lian longed to rush forward and say, *"Shaoye, don't walk alone—I'm here with you."*

Situ Jin, who was waiting outside, approached and said quietly, "Xiahou—the Imperial Clan Court has sentenced the empress dowager to drink poisoned wine for the crime of defiling the palace. They came to report to the chief, but in his current state…should we tell him?"

Xiahou Lian paused, his gaze still on Shen Jue—then his brow furrowed, and his expression turned cold. "No need. Just have them carry out the punishment."

Situ Jin was silent a moment, then added, "There's also Zhuxia, the empress dowager's chief maid—what should be done with her?"

Xiahou Lian recalled Zhuxia—how she had sat weeping before the Guanyin Hall in Guangling Temple, grieving Shen Jue. "Where is she?"

"The Imperial Clan Court."

Chapter 83:
Unending Night

THE SETTING SUN PAINTED the golden dragon motifs of the Imperial Clan Court crimson, its light creeping across the upturned eaves before finally settling on the rooftop's guardian beasts and staining them bloodred. Situ Jin pushed open the building's vermilion doors to reveal the pitch-black interior.

"I'll wait here," he said. "The court will soon lock its gates—be quick."

Xiahou Lian nodded and stepped across the threshold. Situ Jin stood in the fading sunlight, watching the darkness swallow Xiahou Lian's figure. Inside her cell, Zhuxia sat facing the wall. She was clad in a prisoner's white garment, her long hair cascading over her shoulders. She looked like a forsaken ghost. Xiahou Lian approached and knelt outside the bars, placing his goose-quill saber on the ground.

Zhuxia sighed faintly, as if she'd long known this day would arrive. "You've come."

"Yes. I've come."

"Did the chief send you to kill me?"

"No. I came on my own." Xiahou Lian lowered his eyes. "I don't trust you. You were the empress dowager's personal maid before she even entered the palace. You've been together for years—your bond runs deep. Every secret the empress dowager knew about the chief, you know as well. I'm sorry, but I must kill you."

Zhuxia froze. After a long moment, she laughed softly. "Our bond runs deep… Yes, I've accompanied Her Majesty since when she was a young lady cloistered within her private chambers, and when she was a low-ranking concubine in the palace. I watched her climb step by step to become the most revered woman in all the Forbidden City. But in the end, she lied to me. She promised she would spare the chief—that she couldn't bear to widow me. And then what? The incense ceremony at Guangling

Temple was a trap meant to ensnare the chief like a helpless turtle! She wanted him dead, and she refused him any chance of survival!”

Xiahou Lian watched her in silence.

Zhuxia slowly stood and glided to the bars like a puppet. She stared into the empty darkness. “But was the chief any better? His affection—the rouge he gave me, the care he showed—it was all a lie. He was just prying information about Her Majesty from me. They both had minds that were crystal clear—the only fool was me. I couldn’t distinguish honesty from deceit; I believed Her Majesty saw me as a sister, and I believed the chief truly loved me.” She looked down at Xiahou Lian with a desolate smile. “Tell me, am I right?”

Xiahou Lian met her gaze. In the dim candlelight, her eyes brimmed with sorrow, shimmering with unshed tears. He didn’t know what to say. Shen Jue owed her—that was true. After a long silence, Xiahou Lian said, “I won’t defend the chief. I only ask that you remember—your killer is *me*, Xiahou Lian. When you plead your case before Lord Yama in the underworld, don’t accuse the wrong man. The chief hasn’t ordered your death. This is my own decision.”

Zhuxia laughed mockingly. “Oh? Aren’t you afraid of retribution? You’re willing to bear his sins, but aren’t you afraid the underworld will eventually come for you?”

“Miss Zhuxia.” Xiahou Lian looked down at his hands, calloused and scarred from years of wielding blades. “Those of us who walk a path through the night will meet a ghost sooner or later. I’ve long been prepared. I’ll be culpable for the chief’s crimes and bear the retribution. Right and wrong, good and evil—I can’t afford to care anymore. Those who walk in darkness are guided by their own hearts, not morality.”

“Why do you protect him this way? Because of your childhood bond?” Zhuxia pressed her forehead against the bars, studying Xiahou Lian. “You’re as foolish as I was, Xiahou-xiongdi; he’s just using you too. He treats you well because you’re skilled—and because you could still take a blade for him in the future.”

“You don’t understand, Miss Zhuxia. He may seem hellish to others, but to me, he is paradise.” Without elaborating further, he picked up his

goose-quill saber and stood to push open the cell door. “It’s time for you to be on your way.”

Zhuxia stared at him, realization dawning. “You’re like me,” she said very softly. “You love him too, don’t you?”

Xiahou Lian didn’t answer.

Zhuxia smiled. “I guessed right. How could anyone not love him? The first time I saw him, he was walking down the imperial avenue; he was surrounded by a crowd, and still he stood out. The dullest robes couldn’t have dimmed his radiance; it was as if he’d descended from the heavens. None of the self-proclaimed celestial consorts in the Forbidden City could compare to him.”

She truly loved him. In the entire vast palace, he alone treated her kindly. Her family saw her only as a money tree—nine out of ten letters from home demanded silver. Her masters saw her only as a servant—even the empress dowager was an untouchable superior. Shen Jue—Shen Jue alone was like her; they were two lonely souls in the depths of the imperial palace. She’d thought that they could warm each other. Who could have known that she’d never truly won his heart? She looked at Xiahou Lian with tears in her eyes. “See? You’re a man, yet you’re in love with him too.”

“What does it feel like to love someone?” Xiahou Lian asked her.

Zhuxia tilted her head and smiled. “I’d say it’s like…joy. Like you endured all your life’s suffering and wounds just to meet him. When you do, the bitterness fades, the pain vanishes—your whole life becomes happy.”

Xiahou Lian fell silent for a long while. He’d never been able to distinguish familial love from romantic love. Situ Jin described love as warmth; Zhuxia called it joy. But didn’t family also inspire those feelings? What exactly was Shen Jue to him? He had tasted joy too, but it was different for him. And he didn’t feel as though he’d endured *one* lifetime of suffering—he must have suffered through many lifetimes to deserve to meet someone as extraordinary as Shen Jue. He pressed a hand to his chest, feeling his heart beat steadily beneath his ribs. Hidden within was the shadow of a frost-laden youth, his most treasured secret.

Suddenly, he understood: Shen Jue was both his family and his beloved. Xiahou Lian loved him, so he longed to be his family—to stay by his side through this lifetime, never to part. In that instant, he finally tasted the essence of love. For the first time in his twenty-four years, his heart ached with a bittersweet pang. It couldn't be described as either sweet or numb—yet it was a sensation he was willing to drown in, never turning back.

Zhuxia smiled bleakly. "Still, I met the wrong person, so my joy was laced with blades. I swallowed it, and it doomed me."

Xiahou Lian collected himself. "You're a good woman," he said softly. "In your next life, I hope you won't misjudge anyone."

She lowered her head and wiped away her tears. "Kill me, Xiahou-xiongdi. You're right—you can't trust me. After all, I served Her Majesty. If I live, I will surely seek justice for her. Kill me, and it all ends."

Xiahou Lian said nothing more. Lowering his eyes, he slowly drew his blade. The steel flickered ominously in the dim cell, reflecting the candlelight. "May your journey be peaceful, Miss."

Zhuxia laughed bitterly. "Has Her Majesty already departed?"

"Yes. An hour ago."

"Good. If I hurry, perhaps I can catch up to her." She straightened her clothing and tucked loose strands of hair behind her ears. Taking a deep breath, she knelt before Xiahou Lian, tilting her head back and closing her eyes. In that moment, as the lamplight outlined her delicate features, her beauty was breathtaking.

Xiahou Lian raised his blade with both hands. Across the wall stretched their shadows—one stood holding a saber overhead, while the other knelt in resignation. The blade flashed, and crimson blood splattered against the stone wall. The woman's head rolled on the ground, her hair still perfectly arranged, her gold hairpin glinting faintly in the light, like the head of an exquisitely crafted puppet. Xiahou Lian stared at Zhuxia's severed head for a long moment, then sheathed his blade and walked out of the cell. He emerged from the Imperial Clan Court drenched in blood to find Situ Jin waiting for him in the slanting sunlight. Without a word,

Xiahou Lian approached him, and Situ Jin removed his cloak and handed it to him.

“How will you explain this to the chief?” Situ Jin asked. “After what Dai-xiansheng said, he might not have agreed to her execution.”

“I had to kill her.” Xiahou Lian gripped the hilt of his goose-quill saber and looked toward the horizon. The setting sun dyed the sky bloodred, like a battlefield after slaughter. “Do you remember what Xu Ruoyu said when he accused the chief?”

“For his crimes, he deserves to be dismembered by horses,” Situ Jin recalled, “his corpse thrown into the street and left to rot for a hundred days, and his flesh devoured by dogs.”

“Left to rot in the street and devoured by dogs,” Xiahou Lian repeated, his voice low. “That was how my mother died.”

Situ Jin froze. He remembered the Garuda. Many years ago, he’d crossed blades with her in the palace. He was just seventeen—young, but already a master of the Blizzard Saber. Still, when he faced that demonic assassin, he’d been as helpless as a chicken awaiting slaughter. Now he understood. No one could ever forget the sight of his mother’s corpse abandoned in the streets. This man named Xiahou Lian bore a bone-deep scar on his heart. He would never allow the last of his beloved kin to suffer the same fate as his mother—not even if that meant destroying himself.

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XIAHOU LIAN WENT to the Shen residence to ask whether Shen Jue was home. Lianxiang told him that Shen Jue had returned to the palace. Of course—the young emperor still needed placating, and Shen Jue couldn’t neglect that duty.

The sky had darkened. The moon was a faint silhouette behind the winter trees’ skeletal branches, which stretched across the heavens like cracks in celadon porcelain. Households had settled in for the night, shops

had closed, and even stray dogs had returned to their dens. Xiahou Lian walked along the empty streets, thinking of Shen Jue.

Shen Jue was busy year-round; he never rested when others did. While the emperor amused himself in the big cat enclosure, Shen Jue had to sit in the Directorate of Ceremonial, reviewing memorials. Xiahou Lian remembered how lost Shen Jue had looked when they left Dai Shengyan's residence. Still, he had to paste on a calm smile and return to the palace to deal with countless people. Others could take a break when they were sad or grieving—but not Shen Jue. Xiahou Lian's heart ached for him, but there was nothing he could do. He had only his blade; he knew only how to kill. Beyond that, he couldn't help.

Xiahou Lian went to the Eastern Depot to ask about Qiye Garden. The records office said that they'd found no trace of any suspicious figures. Neither Chiyan nor Tang Shiqi had sent a message. Someone had spotted a man who resembled Chiyan in Pingliang Prefecture, but that had been before he disappeared. Tang Shiqi was even more elusive; spies from the Tang clan reported that he'd never returned.

"In all honesty, there's nothing in the desolate northern frontier but plains of snow. So it'd be a miracle if he survived a blizzard in the mountains," the clerk said apologetically.

Xiahou Lian nodded and replied that he understood. He did know what the clerk meant, and he hadn't held out much hope to begin with—he just wasn't willing to give up entirely. After days of tension, he was exhausted. He turned and left, heading straight home.

Xiahou Lian lived alone, having purchased no servants. Within his three-courtyard residence, only the main hall and bedroom were unlocked; the rest of the rooms were sealed. The weather had turned cold, and the vast courtyard felt desolate and devoid of warmth. Too lazy to cook, Xiahou Lian washed with cold water by the well, draped his clothes over his shoulders, and returned to his room bare-chested to sleep. He opened the door and lit the lantern on the side table. Immediately, the dim glow illuminated a figure slumped over the square table.

It was Shen Jue. He was asleep, his arms cushioning his head, and his cloud-patterned cloak was still draped over his shoulders. When had he

come? Hadn’t he returned to the palace? Xiahou Lian had assumed Shen Jue would stay there overnight, yet here he was.

Xiahou Lian sat beside him, gazing down at his face. He must’ve been exhausted—dark circles shadowed his eyes, and his features were drawn with fatigue. His usually pale face looked even more bloodless, as if it were cut from a paper-thin sheet of ice.

Xiahou Lian sighed, let Shen Jue’s hair down, and carried him to the bed. He undid the golden buttons at his collar, then removed his cloak, untied his sash, and slipped off his pleated robe and silk trousers. Shen Jue drowsily opened his eyes for a moment, then closed them again. Xiahou Lian removed his boots, pushed him toward the inner side of the bed, and tucked the quilt tightly around him to keep out the cold. Only then did he blow out the candle and climb into bed himself.

The bed-curtains fell, plunging the canopy bed into darkness—it was a tiny world, enclosed on all sides, that contained only Xiahou Lian and Shen Jue. Xiahou Lian blinked, waiting for his eyes to adjust. He gradually made out Shen Jue’s faint outline beside him. Shen Jue was deeply asleep, his face turned inward, his arm brushing Xiahou Lian’s. Through the thin layer of silk, Xiahou Lian could feel the warmth of his skin.

This is all right, thought Xiahou Lian. He would stay by Shen Jue’s side—without crossing boundaries, without overstepping. A lifetime would pass in the blink of an eye. They were both men. Even if they were a couple, they couldn’t have children, and being too affectionate might seem strange. Given Shen Jue’s status, it would only invite gossip. It would be better for Xiahou Lian to remain by Shen Jue’s side as his servant; that was also a form of companionship.

Content, he closed his eyes. The scent of night quietly permeated the air with a faint, cool sweetness. He felt drowsy now, his breathing steadying as he drifted toward sleep—and then the figure beside him shifted closer. A cold hand touched his waist, slowly embracing him. Xiahou Lian’s eyes flew open in surprise.

“Let me hold you,” Shen Jue said, his voice hoarse, thick with exhaustion. “Just for a moment.”

Xiahou Lian returned the embrace. He patted Shen Jue’s back slowly, gently, gazing at him silently in the darkness. *It’s all right, Shaoye. You’re*

my only remaining family, and I'll protect you no matter what.

Shen Jue's face was nestled against his shoulder. "I'm so tired, A-Lian."

Xiahou Lian lowered his head, touching his forehead to Shen Jue's. "Don't worry, Shaoye. I'm here. We'll share your burden—then you won't be so tired."

Chapter 84:
Rain and Snow

WINTER CAME EARLY to the capital. While it was still merely drizzling in the south, snow already blanketed the capital. On the winter solstice, a blizzard engulfed the city, turning the world white. The air was piercingly cold—a single breath felt like it froze one's lungs.

Xiahou Lian left the office, slinging his arms around his brothers' shoulders as they walked together to the gate. There, the others mounted their horses and vanished into the snowstorm while Xiahou Lian headed home on foot. He had a horse—Shen Jue had given him a fine Mongolian steed. By the end of each month, though, his salary was spent. And feeding the horse was costly enough; he couldn't afford a saddle. Too embarrassed to admit he was broke, he let the horse idle and grow fat at home. The icy winds stabbed at his collar like knives. Rubbing his hands together for warmth, Xiahou Lian trudged through the snow and thought of Shen Jue.

As the year drew to a close, Shen Jue was busier than ever. Personnel evaluations, suburban sacrifices, the New Year's banquet at the ancestral temple—everything seemed to require his attention. For the past fortnight, Shen Jue had stayed in the palace, and Xiahou Lian rarely saw him. At twenty-four years of age—to be twenty-five soon, on the twelfth day of the twelfth month—Xiahou Lian was experiencing longing for the first time. It felt like his heart was being seared in oil—the sensation was agonizing, unbearable. Every day, he went to Lianxiang's quarters for meals and chatter, hoping to glimpse Shen Jue. So far, he'd succeeded only once. That night, Shen Jue had stayed for less time than it took to drink a cup of tea, muttered "Stay out of trouble," and returned to the palace.

Halfway home, Xiahou Lian spotted a tavern. As he considered buying some wine, a plain white carriage pulled up beside him. A small circle of light from the lantern hanging from its eaves pushed back the encroaching darkness. Shen Wenxing, who sat beside the coachman, waved at him.

"Get in," said Shen Jue, lifting the curtain to reveal half his face.

Xiahou Lian's heart leaped with joy, though his expression remained calm. He climbed into the carriage and sat facing Shen Jue. "How do you have time to leave the palace today? Isn't there a banquet?"

"I don't care." The dim light inside the carriage obscured Shen Jue's face, but obvious irritation laced his voice. "I don't care—I needed air. The palace has no shortage of people, and not everything requires my personal attention."

"Good," Xiahou Lian said. "You should rest. Don't overwork yourself."

The carriage rolled slowly forward, jolting over the uneven ground. Shen Jue leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. Xiahou Lian watched him quietly; even in the faint light, his silhouette was exquisite.

As the carriage entered the street leading to Xiahou Lian's alley, the moon emerged. The winter-solstice night market was in full swing, and the road bustled with noise. Xiahou Lian lifted the curtain to look outside. Moonlight and lantern light spilled in, illuminating a bruise on Shen Jue's temple, partially hidden beneath his black gauze cap.

"What happened to your forehead?"

Shen Jue opened his eyes. "I was careless and fell."

Had he fallen while walking? Xiahou Lian found that explanation odd, but he didn't press. The rest of the journey passed in silence.

When they reached Xiahou Lian's home, he prepared to disembark. After spending half a month apart from Shen Jue, he was reluctant to go. Nevertheless, he bid Shen Jue farewell and stepped out of the carriage. Moonlight bathed the snow in a silvery glow. Xiahou Lian took a few steps, leaving deep footprints. *Should I ask him to stay?*

In the past, those words would've come easily, without a second thought. Now that his feelings had changed, however, everything was different. He couldn't bring himself to say a single word. Still, he knew that Shen Jue would only get busier as the year drew to a close. Would they really go another half-month without seeing each other?

Xiahou Lian finally made up his mind. He turned and called out, "Shaoye!"

At the same moment, Shen Jue called his name from the carriage. Their voices blended, making it unclear who'd spoken first. "You first," Shen Jue said through the window. "What is it?"

"Nothing much," Xiahou Lian said. "But today's the winter solstice. How about we share a drink? There's a great tavern ahead where the second floor overlooks the street. Will you join me?"

"All right."

Shen Jue stepped out of the carriage, wrapped in a thick cloak and holding a hand warmer. Shen Wenxing carried a lantern for them. When they entered the tavern, they secured a private room facing the street. Shen Jue entered first to change his clothes while Xiahou Lian and Shen Wenxing waited outside.

Xiahou Lian tilted his head toward Shen Wenxing. "Is the chief in low spirits?"

Shen Wenxing let out a long hum, then gave a rather shifty answer. "Who dares guess Godfather's thoughts? Why not ask him yourself, Lord Xiahou?"

His evasive tone made Xiahou Lian suspect more strongly that something was amiss. "How did the chief get that bruise on his forehead?"

Shen Wenxing scratched his temple. "Godfather wasn't paying attention, and he took a fall. How else?"

These eunuchs could lie without batting an eye, spinning tales on the spot. The ground was covered in thick snowdrifts, so how could a simple fall have left such a large bruise? Xiahou Lian rapped Shen Wenxing's forehead. "Tell me the truth."

Shen Wenxing grimaced. "Godfather forbade me to say."

Xiahou Lian grabbed his collar and dragged him to a water vat as if threatening to dunk his head. "Talk or I'll toss you in."

Shen Wenxing clung to Xiahou Lian's waist. "It was His Majesty!" he admitted in a whine. "Today was supposed to be a lecture day, but His Majesty refused to leave the big cat enclosure. Godfather knelt to urge His Majesty to study—but you know how His Majesty is. He's still a child with a temper, and when things don't go his way, he throws tantrums and hurls

things. Godfather was unlucky—a fan handle flew up and struck his forehead. That's how he got the bruise."

So that was it. Xiahou Lian released Shen Wenxing, sighing. No wonder Shen Jue had left the palace—he must've been humiliated by the young emperor's tantrum, furious enough to abandon his duties in protest. How could someone of his status show his face bearing that bruise? It would only invite ridicule.

Shen Wenxing clasped his hands together, sighing like an old man. "Times have changed. Godfather is determined to be a loyal minister now. The other day, the censorate impeached Deputy Commander Liu of the Embroidered Uniform Guard for accepting bribes—he took a mere hundred taels of silver. In the past, a reprimand would've sufficed, but Godfather outright stripped Commander Liu of his position. That's all well and good, but without 'side income,' who would be willing to work? That especially goes for those used to taking bribes—cutting off that stream of income is like cutting their throats!"

"Will they turn on the chief?" Xiahou Lian asked.

"Hard to say." Shen Wenxing shook his head, scowling. "The chief grand secretary also wants reforms, starting with the elimination of redundant officials—including those in the Eastern Depot. Godfather marked it with vermilion ink, approving it outright. Alienating His Majesty, alienating his subordinates, and clipping his own wings—how can this end well? A new favorite, Gao Decai, has started whispering in His Majesty's ear about establishing a *Western* Depot. Thankfully, the court officials are up in arms about removing the late empress's name from the ancestral tablets and barring her from the imperial temple. His Majesty still relies on Godfather to mediate with the ministers, so he hasn't agreed to Gao Decai's proposal yet. Otherwise, our days would be even harder."

Shen Jue's voice suddenly rang out behind them. "Shen Wenxing, do you no longer value your tongue?"

Shen Wenxing shuddered and bowed immediately, slapping himself in the face. "Your godson spoke out of turn! He deserves punishment!"

Xiahou Lian stopped Shen Jue. "I made him tell me."

Shooting Shen Wenxing a glare, Shen Jue swept back into the room. Xiahou Lian tossed Shen Wenxing a silver ingot, telling him not to worry and go buy them some wine, then followed Shen Jue inside and closed the door.

Shen Jue had changed out of his official robes and into a casual jade-colored robe patterned with clouds. He leaned against the lattice window, gazing down at the bustling street below. The shouts of vendors rose and fell, and the lanterns lining the entire street rendered the scene as bright as day. It was a stunning sight.

“You needn’t concern yourself with such matters—I have my own plans,” Shen Jue said, not looking at Xiahou Lian.

“I know. Do whatever you think is right—I won’t discourage you.” Xiahou Lian opened two jugs of wine and passed one to Shen Jue. They clinked their jugs, and each took a sip. “Does your forehead still hurt?”

Shen Jue said it didn’t, shaking his head, then added, “I actually came out today to discuss something with you. I’ve been thinking about it for a long time, and it seems like the best plan. Taizhou Garrison has an opening for a battalion commander. Pack your things tomorrow, and go assume the post.”

Xiahou Lian froze. “What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said.” Shen Jue frowned. “I’m sending you to go work in Taizhou Garrison. Loafing around the Eastern Depot as some insignificant retainer isn’t a suitable life for you. You’re a man—you need a proper position. You’ve fought in Taizhou before; you know the area. The pirate raids have mostly been quelled. Round up a few bandits, earn some merit, and with a few achievements under your belt, you’ll rise through the ranks. Your being promoted on merit will prevent gossip. Later, you can return to the capital for an official military post.”

Xiahou Lian tried to speak, but Shen Jue raised a hand to stop him. “You should gradually distance yourself from me, Xiahou Lian. Befriend some Qingliu officials, and in time, everyone will forget you ever worked under me.”

Xiahou Lian laughed angrily. “And then what? We’ll serve in the same court and pretend we don’t know each other? I’ll just bow respectfully

and call you ‘Chief,’ then ask if you had a nice breakfast?”

Seeing his displeasure, Shen Jue softened his tone. “A-Lian—this is for your own good. Being known as a ‘eunuch’s dog’ isn’t easy to bear. Once you’re in an official position, you can protect yourself and continue to support me—openly or in secret. Isn’t that right?”

Support him? He’s lying. Xiahou Lian’s brows knitted tightly.

When Xiahou Lian frowned, he emanated a fierce aura that made others wary. But Shen Jue sighed, exhaustion creeping into his face. “A-Lian,” he said again.

“You don’t want my support—you’re afraid you’ll fall one day and drag me down with you.”

Shen Jue fell silent. He swirled his wine jug. The incense smoke wafting from the table veiled his face in a haze, obscuring his expression. “This is for your own good,” he repeated finally. He set the wine jug on the windowsill and pressed his fingers to his brow. “Do you know the fates of past chiefs of the Eastern Depot? The most recent, Wei De—I killed him. The one before him lost Emperor Muzong’s favor when he bought a mansion rumored to have an imperial aura—Emperor Muzong exiled him to Nanjing and he died mysteriously on the journey. And Liu Yao—the infamous chief during the Jinghe era—was dismissed after eight years in power and executed via a thousand cuts.” He paused, lifting his gaze through the smoky haze to meet Xiahou Lian’s eyes, his face devoid of emotion. “I won’t escape a similar fate, A-Lian.”

“No?” Xiahou Lian reached out and gently took Shen Jue’s hand. His fingers were so icy, it felt as if they could never be warmed. Shen Jue had always been this way—a lingering symptom from the time when he’d been forced to kneel in the snow as a child. His body temperature was chronically low, so he was especially vulnerable to the cold. Xiahou Lian cradled his hand, warming it in his palm. “I don’t think I ever told you, but before I left the Garden, I became the Garuda,” he said slowly. Then he chuckled. “The first person I killed after that promotion was Shixin, though. Do you know the fates of past Garudas? My mother was the twenty-eighth—she was beheaded, and her corpse was left to rot in a marketplace. Shixin was the twenty-seventh—I killed him, slicing his body apart with Qianji Thread. The twenty-sixth, Sumo, died in the Garden rebellion, most likely

hacked to pieces by blades. I don’t remember all the ones before that, but none met a good end.”

“You’re different, A-Lian. You’re not the Garuda anymore.”

“But I *am* Xiahou Lian.” he squeezed Shen Jue’s hand. “Shaoye, you’re so strange. You went to such lengths to find me, yet you always try to push me away—last time and now. Please don’t push me away, Shaoye. How many times must I say this for you to understand? My life is yours. Even if the path leads to ruin, I’ll walk it with you.”

Chapter 85:
Lord Yama

AFTER MUCH ARGUING, Xiahou Lian still refused to yield, so Shen Jue gave up on trying to persuade him for the time being. Though their personalities were entirely different, they were equally stubborn. If Shen Jue couldn't sway Xiahou Lian now, he would just have to try again later.

The heavy snow fell silently, dusting the eaves with a soft whisper. The winter night was too cold, and those at the market gradually dispersed, leaving only scattered vendors to pack up and a few porters to carry their loads home, their footprints mottling the snow.

Three wine jugs sat empty on the square table. Shen Jue was tipsy, his mind in a fog. He propped his forehead in his hands for a while as he sat at the table, eventually realizing it was time to go home.

"It's so late," Xiahou Lian observed, then suddenly suggested, "Why not stay at my place?" There was no telling how much effort it took Xiahou Lian to say that so casually. His face betrayed nothing, but his heart pounded. His thoughts were improper, and guilt gnawed at him—yet he reassured himself they'd just share a bed for the night, as they had in old times. That wouldn't cross any lines.

Shen Jue took a moment to process the offer, then smiled. "All right."

In the dim candlelight, tipsy Shen Jue's face was tinged with a faint flush, his fair skin like translucent jade brushed with rouge—unexpectedly beautiful. Xiahou Lian forced himself to look away. He suddenly felt like some beast, luring a drunken innocent home to warm his bed. On his feet, Shen Jue wobbled unsteadily. Xiahou Lian helped him into his cloak, then lifted him onto his back to carry him home.

Xiahou Lian's residence lay deep in an alley past the wide main street and around a bend behind Fuxiang Temple. The snow continued to fall silently. The bells on the temple's eaves chimed faintly in the wind—a delicate, scattered melody. Eastern Depot agents followed at a distance as Xiahou Lian trudged through the snow with Shen Jue on his back. With his

head resting on Xiahou Lian's shoulder, the world was quiet to Shen Jue's ears—so quiet it felt almost lonely.

"A-Lian, doesn't this feel like the old days at the Xie manor?" Shen Jue murmured.

Xiahou Lian looked up at the snow. "It does. That night Lady Xiao punished you with kneeling in the snow, I carried you back just like this."

"Back then, my life felt so miserable. I racked my brain trying to escape—studying constantly, stealing books when I had none, staying up all night to devour them when I did. I wanted to swallow all the knowledge at once." Shen Jue chuckled. "I never thought I'd miss those days most. But Auntie Lan was there, Lianxiang was there, you were there—everyone was there. Those were good times."

Xiahou Lian thought of the courtyard of Shen Jue's manor—the two vats of withered lotuses beneath the eaves framing the desolate little yard, so reminiscent of Qiuwu Courtyard. And the garden pond—it must evoke Wangqing Pavilion in winter. Shen Jue was nostalgic, and so was Xiahou Lian. He also missed the days of long ago, free of blood and blades, when he'd just been a troublemaker scouring the Garden's mountains for bird nests. At its core, nostalgia was merely a longing for irretrievable times. Then again, the current times weren't so bad. Xiahou Lian walked slowly as Shen Jue leaned against his shoulder, his soft hair brushing Xiahou Lian's cheek and neck with a faint tickle. The snowy path stretched endlessly into the impenetrable night as if it would never end. He would happily have carried Shen Jue like this forever, never stopping.

If only this moment would never pass.

Shen Jue tightened his arms around Xiahou Lian. "A-Lian."

"Hm?"

"I was actually lying." Shen Jue's voice was very low. "I don't want you to leave. Don't go, A-Lian. No matter what, don't leave."

Xiahou Lian stopped in his tracks and turned his head to look back at Shen Jue, who was so close that Xiahou Lian could feel his breath. They gazed at one another in the snow. Time continued to rush by like an arrow, yet it seemed unable to pierce the intensity of their locked eyes.

“All right,” Xiahou Lian said. “I won’t.”

He would stay for the rest of his life.

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TANG SHIQI HUDDLED in a corner, doing his best to blend in to the wooden wall behind him. The inn was bustling with noise, yet everyone seemed to have made an unspoken agreement to press themselves against the walls, leaving the center of the room empty. The tables and chairs had been stacked behind the counter, making the inn feel even more cramped. Outside, snow continued to fall, but it was warm inside thanks to the breath of so many people packed into the tight space.

Tang Shiqi was on the second floor, which was just a narrow corridor with a railing on one side and small guest rooms on the other. There was a jujube wood plaque hanging before each room. These were elegantly inscribed with names borrowed from ancient texts: *Gazing at the Azure Sea*, *Begonia in Springtime*, *Snow Beneath the Crag*. The Garden, of course, could never have been so refined; the plaques were there because the inn had originally been a brothel, and the rooms had housed courtesans.

Now, the former brothel belonged to the Garden. The courtesans and madam had been buried in a deep well in the backyard. Tang Shiqi had watched them die with his own eyes. Fortunately, the Garden’s assassins were efficient—their deaths had been painless.

Tang Shiqi sighed and gazed downward. Through the railing, he could see the scene on the first floor. Three men knelt dejectedly in the center of the empty space, bound tightly with ropes. That deep well would soon house three more bodies. Tang Shiqi quietly mourned them, murmuring a prayer under his breath.

The door of a room labeled *Return of the Wild Geese* opened, and a group of men in black robes and white porcelain masks filed out. The one in the middle, who was particularly tall, strode directly to the railing and looked down at the figures from the criminal world who stood below.

Tang Shiqi only recognized half of the men, but he knew that they were the Garden's newly appointed Eight Legions. The Gandharva and Rakshasa stood at the other end of the corridor. The Kinnara leaned against the doorframe—he was an old acquaintance, though Tang Shiqi no longer dared to speak to him. The Garuda was not present; he must have been out on some more important mission. Only the Garden's strongest assassins were eligible to become the Garuda, so he'd likely been assigned to kill someone of great significance.

As the black-robed figures appeared, the crowd fell silent, as if astounded. The dim candlelight illuminated the figures on the second floor; the men's shadows towered ominously against the ceiling, and their expressionless white porcelain masks stared down, sending chills down everyone's spines. A man carrying a large sword stepped forward boldly and looked up at the black-robed figure in the center. "Two weeks ago, Duan-xiansheng, the Garden issued an order that the traitor Xiahou Lian be killed. Now that we've brought him to you, shouldn't you honor your promise and give us the Paradise Fruit?"

Duan Jiu's gaze swept over the trio of men kneeling below. "You've brought *three* Xiahou Lians? I knew Xiahou Lian was skilled at disguise, but I didn't know he could split himself into three."

"The Wuminggui is ever-changing, so he's hard to identify. These three are the closest matches we could find." The swordsman pointed at each in turn. "The one on the left prefers Japanese swords and is highly skilled—just like the Wuminggui. I lost over a dozen disciples capturing him. The one in the middle knows the art of disguise and bone-shrinking techniques. The one on the far right is a mechanical master rumored to have studied in Bashu. We searched far and wide to find these three; surely one of them is the Wuminggui."

Duan Jiu gave a low chuckle, the sound muffled beneath his mask. "None of them is." He paused. "However, it's better to kill ten thousand innocents by mistake than let one guilty man escape."

Duan Jiu raised his right hand and made a gesture. The Kinnara straightened and flipped over the railing like a hawk, landing steadily on the ground. He drew a long blade from beneath his black robe. The three bound men paled and began pleading for mercy. The Kinnara grabbed one of them

in a single hand. The man trembled like a chicken awaiting slaughter. There was a single slash of the Kinnara's blade, and Tang Shiqi heard a chilling wet sound like silk being torn. He could almost imagine the flesh parting beneath the blade, the muscles slowly separating. Blood gushed like a spring, splashing across a corner of Kinnara's white porcelain mask.

Duan Jiu's voice rang out. "I intended to make Xiahou Lian the abbot's successor, but he betrayed the Garden after obtaining the antidote for Seven Fifteen. According to the Garden rules, those who resist shall be drowned, those who flee shall be whipped, those who rebel shall be killed, and those who betray shall be executed. Xiahou Lian has remained a traitor for over four years—he must die! Whoever brings me his head shall have an endless supply of Paradise Fruit. And the Garden will reward your efforts today with Paradise Fruit, out of gratitude, although you have not succeeded. We hope you will continue to serve the Garden loyally."

As Duan Jiu finished speaking, the Gandharva and Rakshasa carried out a sandalwood chest half the height of a man, full to the brim with small black pills that shimmered in the candlelight. The expressions of the crowd below quickly revealed their greed.

Paradise Fruit was the Garden's replacement for Seven Fifteen. Rumor had it that it was made from the same ingredients, yet was ten times more addictive. Sill, the Paradise Fruit's most alluring quality wasn't that it could feed the addiction—it was the unimaginable pleasure it brought, surpassing even the ecstasy of sex. Paradise Fruit induced hallucinations, making those who used it feel they'd been transported to heaven itself—the ultimate desire of all men. Last month, Tang Shiqi witnessed an assassin at Yajiao Mountain Inn forget to lock his door before taking a Paradise Fruit. The man had fled his room in a frenzy and leaped off a cliff into the clouds. No one could know what he'd seen—and Tang Shiqi didn't want to know. He touched the pouch at his waist, which held five Paradise Fruit, his ration for the next year.

The Paradise Fruit cascaded down from the sandalwood chest like a waterfall. The crowd below quickly descended into madness, scrambling to grab the pills. Some shoved the Paradise Fruit into their mouths immediately. The crowd surged like a frenzied tide, people's heads pressing together into clusters like fish eggs. Paradise Fruit rolled across the floor, and those who bent to pick it up were quickly trampled, while those who

couldn’t push forward through the crowd drew their blades and began cutting down those in front. Sensing danger, the front crowd members unsheathed their weapons as well. The small inn erupted into chaos, blood spraying in the darkness like grotesquely blooming flowers. The Kinnara, who had already climbed back up the pillar, used a cloth to wiped the blood off himself. None of the assassins showed any reaction either, their white porcelain masks eerily still.

Duan Jiu chuckled softly. “Look at them. They’re greedy, foolish ants.” It was unclear whom he was addressing. With that, he led his men out through the back door.

In the faint light of dawn, the world outside was pure white, the sky and earth indistinguishable. The snowfields of the northern frontier stretched on endlessly, unobstructed, as if one could see straight to the horizon. The snow fell silently. The chaos inside the inn seemed to belong to another world—a world that had no connection to this one.

In the distance, a carriage approached slowly, soundlessly, its wheels leaving deep tracks in the snow. The assassins knew who sat inside, as did Tang Shiqi—he’d once glimpsed the passenger’s shadow at the border. All he remembered was a figure of pure white like ice-carved jade—like a radiant moon, lofty and untouchable. The figure’s family had a long legacy and had once commanded awe across the land. After hiding in the shadows for a century, he’d finally emerged to rebuild the Garden, unleashing the Paradise Fruit to ensure the assassins’ complete subjugation.

Last month, Garden spies had set out from the northern frontier, and Great Qi’s underground cities had reactivated. The Garden’s inns, brothels, banks, gambling dens, and black markets spanned the empire, reaching as far as the Western Regions. Even the powerful Eastern Depot couldn’t purge every stain from the pond. A steady stream of gold flowed day and night from every corner of Great Qi into the northern frontier—and if that gold had glowed, it would have woven a dense web of light across the entire empire’s map.

Tang Shiqi didn’t know the name of that figure; he only knew that that was the Garden’s true master and the ruler of Great Qi’s underworld—an emperor of the darkness. Some called him the Yama, the king of Hell.

According to the Garden’s rule, no one who encountered the Yama could approach, nor stare—only bow in reverence.

The assassins knelt as one, as if their legs had been severed, pressing their foreheads to the snow. His curiosity burning uncontrollably, Tang Shiqi risked a glance upward, his eyes darting toward the carriage.

A hand slammed his head back into the snow, filling his face with icy grit.

“Do you have a death wish?!” the Kinnara hissed.

Tang Shiqi didn’t dare move again.

From ahead came Duan Jiu’s deep voice—sounding like a humble prayer, solemn as a chant. “I would tear out my hair, crawl on my knees, abandon my flesh and blood, and sink into the ashes of calamity to welcome your arrival, my Bodhisattva, my Buddha.”

Chapter 86:
Flowers Like Dreams

ON NEW YEAR'S EVE, the capital was quiet. Everyone was holed up at home, cooking lavish feasts for New Year's. The streets were empty, devoid of a single soul. Even the patrolling officers of the Five Armies Camp had reduced their shifts. Looking around, all one could see were rows of deserted white streets dotted with occasional figures bundled in thick coats and hurrying home.

Worried that Xiahou Lian would be lonely during New Year's, Lianxiang invited him to celebrate at the Shen manor. Not wanting to show up empty-handed, Xiahou Lian arrived carrying a chicken and a duck. But as soon as he passed the screen at the entrance, he saw piles of New Year's gifts from court officials—countless gold and silver artifacts, as well as ten luminous pearls. Standing there with the struggling poultry shedding their feathers, Xiahou Lian suddenly felt like a country bumpkin.

Lianxiang scolded him for being too formal and bringing gifts for a New Year's Eve meal. Then she shooed him off to Shen Jue's quarters while she busied herself with the feast. In truth, this meal would be for the Shen residence's servants, not for Shen Jue himself. He never returned home for New Year's Eve; the palace kept him too busy—all-nighters were routine for him.

Shen Manor was anything but quiet, though. A steady stream of gift-bearers came and went, servants bustling to transport treasures of all sizes into the storerooms. Local officials who had traveled to the capital for year-end evaluations had somehow even gotten the bright idea to send the household a troupe of beautiful performers, both male and female. As the troupe passed Xiahou Lian, one of the women turned and winked at him.

Xiahou Lian shuddered and retreated to the courtyard. Shen Jue had always been disciplined, avoiding such unsavory indulgences. When he received such gifts, Shen Jue had sold every last performer without hesitation. Xiahou Lian wasn't worried that the troupe would tempt Shen Jue; he only worried that Shen Jue would be too busy in the palace to even

eat a New Year's Eve meal. Xiahou Lian propped his chin on his hand with a sigh, thinking of Shen Jue, his heart itching with longing. Being a chief of the Eastern Depot seemed like such a hassle; Shen Jue would have been better off as a lowly retainer like Xiahou Lian—at least then he'd be able to enjoy a warm bed with his wife and children during the holidays.

Bored, Xiahou Lian wandered idly into the kitchen. The cooks were all locals who specialized in northern cuisine. Northerners loved beef and lamb dishes with bold flavors—wild boar and Manchurian goose were staples on noble tables. The portions were huge—one plate could have fed four or five people. It was probably no different at the palace. After watching for a while, Xiahou Lian commandeered a pot to roast Jinling duck, then made some sweet sticky-rice-stuffed lotus roots and steamed cakes, packing them all into a food box. He left word for Lianxiang that he wouldn't be staying for the feast, then slipped out the back gate.

Borrowing an imperial pass from Situ Jin, Xiahou Lian entered the palace unchallenged, heading straight for the Directorate of Ceremonial's duty office. Everyone inside was too busy to even look up when he entered, and no one paid him any mind. After unsuccessfully searching for Shen Jue for a while, he pulled someone aside to ask after his whereabouts. He learned that Shen Jue was still in the imperial garden, overseeing preparations for the evening banquet. That was a place Xiahou Lian didn't dare go. Barging in to linger in the duty office was one thing, but wandering elsewhere would be too risky. He carried the food box back to the duty office, set it on the heated brick bed, and sat on the thronelike chair, chin in hand, waiting for Shen Jue's return.

Sunlight streamed through the pine-green gossamer curtains and latticed windows, casting shifting patterns of light and shadow across the room.

Xiahou Lian stared blankly at the mother-of-pearl inlay and gold tracery until drowsiness slowly crept over him.

The rustling branches of thousands of trees outside seemed to mingle with the imperial guards' distant, intermittent footsteps. Someone in the next room dragged a chair, its legs scraping against the brick floor with a piercing screech. A young eunuch spoke in a cracked voice like a broken gong, and Xiahou Lian wondered how someone with such a voice could

serve before the emperor. Yet all those sounds seemed distant, like dreams from another lifetime.

The door abruptly opened, and sunlight poured in, filling Xiahou Lian's dark vision with hazy brilliance—a dazzling swirl of reds, blues, and oranges. Someone walked in, rounded the heavy, four-paneled folding screen, and slowly drew near. Xiahou Lian seemed to hear fabric rustling, but he was still half-asleep, his senses blurred as if he was caught in a dream.

The sound drew closer, and suddenly Xiahou Lian's vision darkened as if someone had blocked the light. Something brushed lightly against his upturned cheek—a faint warmth, softly damp, like a petal drifting past his face or a butterfly alighting there for the briefest moment. So light, so fleeting—so intoxicatingly pleasant. Xiahou Lian's heart immediately longed for more, praying that petal or butterfly would linger a little longer.

When he finally woke, it was already dark. A silver-furred cloak—Shen Jue's—was draped over his shoulders. He turned his head and saw Shen Jue seated in an armchair, reviewing memorials by candlelight. The golden glow illuminated his profile; it was flawless as white jade.

"Your audacity grows by the day," Shen Jue said without looking up, his voice cool. "Just because you have my protection, you dare sneak into the palace?"

Xiahou Lian was still half-asleep, his mind lingering on the dream he'd just had—a dream that felt like a kiss.

Shen Jue frowned, sensing his gaze. "Why are you staring at me?"

It was just a dream. There's no way Shen Jue would have snuck a kiss. Xiahou Lian shook his head vigorously, clearing his mind. "It's nothing. Just recalling a dream."

"What dream?" Shen Jue asked casually.

"A…steamy one. I dreamt that a celestial maiden kissed me," Xiahou Lian lied, afraid to tell the truth.

Shen Jue's brush paused mid-stroke, and he let out a cold laugh. "It seems you've been alone, yearning for romance, for too long. Some performer bats her eyes at you, and you're having lustful dreams."

Xiahou Lian blinked. “How do you know that she winked at me?”

Shen Jue coughed lightly. “I know everything that happens in my household. Someone reported that troublemaker’s behavior, assuming you were misbehaving under my roof. What, are you interrogating me now?”

Xiahou Lian grew flustered. “I wasn’t misbehaving! Don’t listen to gossip.” Then he added indignantly, “Who has nothing better to do than slander me on New Year’s? I’ll rip out their tongue!”

Afraid that Xiahou Lian would press further, Shen Jue waved a hand. “Enough. I never doubted you, I was just teasing. What I should be asking you is why you’re sneaking into the palace instead of resting at home?”

Xiahou Lian placed the food box on the table, unstacking the layers to reveal golden Jinling duck, snowy-white rice-stuffed lotus root, and steamed cakes. “Because I wanted to have New Year’s Eve dinner with you,” he said. “Ah—it’s gone cold. You have a kitchen here, right? I’ll heat these up and add a few more dishes.”

“Why insist on eating with me? Didn’t Lianxiang invite you to the residence’s dinner?”

“It’s not a New Year’s Eve dinner if you don’t eat it with family,” Xiahou Lian said, then called for servants to reheat the food. “I made these dishes myself—you’ve got to at least pretend to appreciate them.”

The brush in Shen Jue’s hand again hesitated mid-stroke. Shen Jue knew everything Xiahou Lian had done that day—Shen Jue had immediately ordered that flirtatious performer sold off for winking at the fool. He also knew that Xiahou Lian *had* personally cooked these recipes from Jinling and carried them all the way to the palace. Meanwhile, Shen Jue had been stuck in the imperial garden dealing with the emperor’s latest absurdity—the brat wanted to host the New Year’s banquet in the big cat enclosure, insisting everyone dine alongside the tigers. How he’d longed to kick that wretched child aside and rush back to see Xiahou Lian. Though the two men lived apart—one in the palace, one outside it—Shen Jue kept track of Xiahou Lian’s every move. The idiot just didn’t know it. After each grueling day, the only thing that brought Shen Jue joy was reading the reports that detailed Xiahou Lian’s daily activities.

Shen Jue suppressed a smile. “Fine,” he said mildly. “As you wish.”

“It’s not a New Year’s Eve dinner if you don’t eat it with family.” Having said that, Xiahou Lian swiftly grew quiet. He hadn’t found Chiyan yet; he didn’t even know whether his brother was alive or dead. If he was alive, who was he sharing this New Year’s Eve with?

Shen Jue noticed his distraction. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just thinking of my brother.” Xiahou Lian stood by the window gazing at the ink-black sky. In an hour, fireworks would light up the palace, painting the heavens in dazzling colors. “I’m afraid…afraid he might already be gone. And I haven’t even made him a memorial tablet. Without one, he can’t hear my prayers or find his way home. He’ll become a wandering ghost with nowhere to return to.”

Shen Jue watched as Xiahou Lian stared into the dark night. There was always something unbearably lonely about the way Xiahou Lian looked at the sky—the look of a man who’d wandered too long and ached for home. Shen Jue stepped up behind him. “That won’t happen.”

Xiahou Lian turned to meet his eyes. Shen Jue took his hand, his fingers brushing the beaded bracelet he’d given Xiahou Lian. The deep-red beads resembled “love beans”[18]—the shining red seeds of acacia trees. Whether that was their natural hue or the result of being polished by years of yearning, the beads glowed warm and full.

“These prayer beads are sacred. The Buddha will hear your wishes as long as you’re wearing them.” Shen Jue’s voice softened. “Do you know of the Japanese belief that gods aren’t born of heaven and earth but from mortal faith? If people stop believing in a god, it fades away.”

“No. You understand Japanese—I don’t.”

“Well, now you know.” Shen Jue’s grip tightened. “Likewise, so long as mortals keep faith, their gods endure. So don’t worry—as long as you remember your brother, he will survive.”

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ON NEW YEAR'S EVE, Yunxian Tower blazed with light, red silks cascading from the beams to frame the rosy candlelight within the octagonal crimson lanterns. The entire building seemed bathed in a reddish glow. Women's skin shimmered like fine mutton-fat jade under the dusky lanterns. Onstage, an opera singer's voice soared, warbling and clear as it carried far into the night.

A shabbily dressed young man in a patched sheepskin coat and cloth shoes slipped into the brothel's back courtyard. A pack covered in patches was slung over his shoulder. He kept his head down and didn't say a word. The courtesans sneered at this country bumpkin; some even recoiled from his filthiness, giving him a wide berth. The madam, however, found him refreshingly honest, unlike the slick idlers who loitered on Rouge Lane, forever flirting with her girls. Just last month, some rake had impregnated her rising star, costing her five nights' sleep. This boy, though—his eyes were clear and his thoughts plain as day. She trusted him at once.

"Where are you from?" she asked with a warm smile, leading him inside.

"The mountains."

"Ah—so you're truly from the country." She pushed open a door, lifting her skirts to step over the threshold. "Why come to the capital? Couldn't farm anymore at home? Fleeing a famine?"

The young man followed the madam into a courtyard where the many flowers had now withered into tangled vines. Wing rooms, all illuminated, lined the courtyard on both sides. Suggestive sounds drifted from within, and warm yellow light filtered through the window screens, the hazy glow hinting at a secret world.

"I'm looking for my brother," the young man said softly. "I lost him."

"Oh dear. The capital's big and crowded too—finding someone here is like looking for a needle in a haystack." The madam pulled out a key and unlocked the door of a woodshed. "You can sleep here. The last helper stayed here too, but he had a stroke of luck—he caught the Eastern Depot chief's eye and soared to fortune. He left some clothes behind–see whether they fit."

The young man entered and set his pack on the wooden table. He found some rough garments in a chest by the wall, picked them up, and inspected them. Then he nodded, saying that they were wearable, though out of season.

“Work hard, and I’ll make sure you’re paid fairly. Don’t worry,” the madam told him. “As for your brother, don’t fret; you’ll have a chance to find him. Everyone knows our Rouge Lane is the best source of information. Take your time and ask around, and you’re sure to find him.”

He nodded.

A clear voice rang out. “New errand boy?”

The youth looked up to see a graceful silhouette step from the doorway. The crimson lantern behind her cast a soft halo around her face, illuminating it; her exquisite features almost melded with the lamplight. “What’s your name?” asked A-Chu.

Fireworks erupted in the sky, the explosions as loud as thunder. Limned by the brilliant flares, the young man’s silhouette grew clear. His face was calm, and his eyes as clear and bright as a flawless colored glaze. A single earring glinted like a firefly in his right ear.

“My surname is Xiahou,” he said. “Just call me that.”

Chapter 87:
A Kite Soaring Skyward

IT WAS THE FIRST DAY of the new year.

The sky had yet to brighten, and the world was still shrouded in hazy darkness. The steady drip of the water clock echoed from the palace, the wind carrying its languid, unbroken rhythm. Situ Jin struggled to weave his way through the bustling crowd of eunuchs. In an hour, the emperor would appear at the Fengtian Gate to receive New Year's greetings from civil and military officials, regional princes and marquises, and envoys from overseas nations. The eunuchs of the Directorate of Ceremonial whirled around like tops, some carrying freshly replaced teacups for the emperor, others holding incense burners to be used later in Jinshen Hall. They scurried back and forth like ants beneath the towering eaves of the palace gates, their heads bowed in their haste. When they spotted Situ Jin, they barely had time to offer formal greetings. "Sir," they'd murmur hurriedly, brushing past him.

Shen Jue ought to have been awake by now. As the de facto head of the Directorate of Ceremonial, he would have to don his python robe and ceremonial belt to stand by the emperor's side during the audience, overseeing the officials as they knelt in the dust and shouted "Long live the emperor!" Shen Jue was never one to dawdle, always departing his quarters precisely on schedule to lead a grand procession of eunuchs that would rouse the young emperor from his prolonged slumber.

By the time Situ Jin reached the main bedroom, a group of attendants was already waiting outside the door. Some held towels and combs, others carried soap, and a few held teacups for rinsing one's mouth. They were all waiting for Shen Jue to finish changing into his court robes, after which they'd enter to serve him.

Situ Jin knocked lightly. "Chief," he said in a low tone, "this humble official has urgent matters to report."

"Enter," came Shen Jue's voice.

The young eunuchs filed in through the door, Situ Jin slipping into their ranks. Shen Jue sat inside on a high-backed chair, his python robe neatly arranged and his ceremonial belt fastened impeccably. Only his hair remained unarranged, cascading over his shoulders like a black waterfall. A young eunuch stood behind him holding an ivory comb to help him tie up the chief's hair; another held up a mirror so Shen Jue could check his appearance. A third offered him a teacup alongside a tooth-cleaning twig and powder. As Shen Jue rinsed his mouth, he listened to Situ Jin's report.

"Last night, this humble official received secret intelligence: The informant we planted in the Xingqing Guild of Yingtian Prefecture has gone silent. Our contact last met with him on the first day of the twelfth month, but there's been no word since. The Eastern Depot has turned Nanjing upside down but found no trace of him."

The Xingqing Guild was Yingtian Prefecture's largest canal-transport guild, operating routes year-round between Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Beijing, and Tianjin. During warmer months, when the rivers weren't frozen, they ventured as far as the northern frontiers for the sake of trade. Early last year, Shen Jue had planted three informants within the guild, one of whom had actually risen to the position of dock foreman. But in the eleventh month, all three abruptly went dark. That usually meant that an informant had either defected or been exposed and killed by underworld figures. These three, though, seemed to have vanished into thin air, leaving not even a shadow behind. It was as if they'd never existed.

Shen Jue frowned. He wiped his face with a towel and rose from the chair to stride out the door. "What do our other informants in Yingtian Prefecture say? The Xingqing Guild has close dealings with the Laifu Guild —any news from them?"

Following behind Shen Jue, Situ Jin replied, "The Laifu Guild informant is also missing. The day before yesterday, this humble official received an official dispatch from the Lingzhou Garrison stating that our informant in the Yanghe Canal Guild has also gone silent. Chief, all of the informants we planted in major canal guilds…are gone."

Shen Jue halted abruptly, which forced the entourage behind him to stop too. He turned to Situ Jin with a trace of anger. "Why are you only reporting this now?"

Situ Jin bowed his head. “Originally, we arranged to check in with the informants at the beginning of each month. The missing informants were last seen at the beginning of the eleventh month. When they failed to meet our contacts in the twelfth month, our contacts reported it right away. Given the time that elapsed while the documents were drafted, sent to the capital, and reviewed by various Eastern Depot offices, revealing the pattern, the news reached this humble official at the earliest possible moment. There has been no deliberate delay.”

“Was anything about the last intelligence they transmitted unusual?”

“No. This humble official reviewed all of it; it just detailed internal strife within the canal guilds, nothing out of the ordinary.” Situ Jin furrowed his brow. “However, I did notice one thing: On the ninth day of the tenth month, the Eastern Depot intercepted a Xingqing Guild ship bound for Beijing and Tianjin. During the inspection, the ship caught fire, completely destroying the cargo. According to the Guild’s testimony, the ship was smuggling Yanghe liquor—but now it seems there may have been more to that.”

Shen Jue fell silent. Informants disappearing wasn’t unusual—infiltrating the underworld was inherently perilous, and canal guilds were notorious for their ruthlessness. It was entirely possible the missing informants had simply slipped up and been killed. Only he and Situ Jin knew the list of informants, so a leak was out of the question. Defection was unlikely as well—the informants’ families were under Shen Jue’s watch, and would the informants abandon their own kin? Could it be that… Shen Jue strode forward, his brow furrowed as he stepped onto the imperial avenue. The pristine snow crunched underfoot.

Suddenly, Shen Wenxing scurried up from the opposite direction, his face a picture of distress. “Godfather, His Majesty refuses to get up. He asks whether the morning audience may be canceled.”

Throbbing pain shot through Shen Jue’s temples. “Canceled? What nonsense—how could it be? The New Year’s audience is mandated by ancestral law. If he won’t get up, I’ll drag him out myself. And if I find him still lazing in bed when I arrive, I’ll throw his ceremonial robes in his face—just see if I don’t!”

Shen Wenxing broke into a cold sweat. Shen Jue was notoriously headstrong and arrogant, and the young emperor seemed determined to provoke him at every turn. Shen Wenxing had no doubt that his godfather would make good on his threat. Forcing a smile, he hastily replied, “Godfather, please calm your anger! This godson will think of a way to get His Majesty out of bed!”

As he turned to leave, Shen Jue quickly called after him. “Wait! There’s still an hour before the ceremony. Go summon those damned cabinet ministers to the palace—tell them His Majesty refuses to appear, and let them sort it out. Hmph! If I can’t rest, neither shall they!”

Shen Wenxing brightened. “As wise as ever, Godfather!” With that, he hurried off.

After a pause, Shen Jue turned back to Situ Jin. “Send men to kidnap the leader of the Xingqing Guild and bring him to the capital—straight to the imperial prison. With the torture methods at our disposal, he’ll talk. I want to know what precious cargo they were smuggling that they’d rather destroy than let the Eastern Depot uncover.”

Situ Jin hesitated. “If this incites a riot among the canal workers, the censors will surely fuss. Given your current need for caution—”

Shen Jue sneered. “I’ll merely be ‘inviting him for tea,’ not taking money or lives. If those lowlifes dare riot, they’ll be treated as rebels! Pass the order: When ‘serving’ the Xingqing Guild’s leader, use methods that strike deep without leaving external marks. Let’s see whether his mouth is harder than my rods!”

Situ Jin acknowledged the order, then added, “The agents sent to the Garden temple have returned. We’ve archived the documents salvaged from what Xiahou Lian burned and retrieved his belongings. But we couldn’t find the will from the Garuda that he mentioned—only remnants of volumes gnawed by rats. The will was likely destroyed.”

“Then let it be. Organize the documents; I’ll review them when I have time. Xiahou Lian is still asleep, so wait awhile before you summon him to take a look.”

Shen Jue took a few steps, then recalled the previous night. Xiahou Lian always slept like a log around Shen Jue, completely defenseless and

undisturbed no matter how much he was poked. Last night, Shen Jue had secretly pulled Xiahou Lian into his arms, indulging in a few clandestine caresses. The memory alone set his blood racing.

He'd risen early to avoid waking Xiahou Lian, changing rooms at the third mark of the yin hour.[19] Now, with the cabinet ministers still coaxing the emperor out of bed, Shen Jue was in no hurry. A restless itch took hold—should he go back for another look at Xiahou Lian? After some deliberation, he decided against it, lest he lose track of time.

Situ Jin departed, and Shen Jue strolled leisurely toward Qianqing Palace. The sky gradually brightened, the emerald tiles and soaring eaves appearing sharp against the dawn. The snow below stretched endlessly, framed by crimson walls—a pristine world. His heart suddenly lightened. The first day of the new year meant a fresh start—it was as if anything were possible. *It doesn't matter,* he thought. As long as Xiahou Lian was by his side, he'd find a way forward, whether his opponents were within the court or the Garden.

After walking some distance, he spotted a little girl sitting on a stoop ahead of him. She wore a bright red jacket, a plain white mamianqun, and a fox-fur collar, and clutched a large kite resembling a tiger with glaring eyes and a white forehead. Her large eyes were excessively black against her snow-white face, giving her the eerie look of a ritual doll.

Shen Jue frowned. He recognized her—Yuan, of the Baili clan; she was from Liaodong, in the north, and was the marquis of Linbei. It was bizarre for a twelve-year-old girl to hold the rank of marquis; there had been several female marquises throughout Great Qi's history, but never one so young. Baili Yuan's background was tragic: A few years ago, a smallpox outbreak in the north had claimed her parents and siblings one by one, leaving her alone to inherit the title. She'd arrived in the capital late last year.

"Marquis of Linbei" sounded prestigious but was little more than an empty title; Baili Yuan's status was barely higher than a commoner's. Since she lacked any real power, anyone in the capital could lord over her, and the servants—ever opportunistic—obviously neglected her.

The marquis of Linbei had an estate in the capital, but it had long fallen into disrepair. Yuan was staying at a courier station instead, but when

officials began visiting for the annual assessments, she'd found herself shoved into inferior quarters. When he learned of this, Shen Jue had petitioned the emperor to bring her into the palace to ensure that she wasn't mistreated.

Still, Baili Yuan and Shen Jue had never spoken to her face-to-face, so Shen Jue had no idea what she was like. He'd avoided her; he found children exasperating due to his interactions with the young emperor. Now that she was right in front of him, however, he couldn't pretend not to see her. Forcing a polite smile, he stepped forward and bowed.

"So early in the morning, and Your Ladyship is here alone?"

Baili Yuan looked up, her large, dark eyes studying Shen Jue. "I came out to fly my kite, but I got lost."

Children were so vexing—who would fly a kite at this hour? Disdain churned inside Shen Jue, but his expression remained neutral as he bent down slightly. "Shall this servant escort you back?"

"All right." The girl stood, lifting her kite. The thick snow made walking difficult, and she naturally reached for Shen Jue's hand. "I might slip. Hold my hand, Depot Chief."

Shen Jue usually disliked being touched, but as the girl had already taken his hand, he had little choice but to clasp it loosely. Her hand was icy cold, perhaps because she'd stayed out in the wind too long. His own hand was no warmer, and their clasped palms drew no heat from each other.

There were no maids or eunuchs in sight, so Baili Yuan must have come out to fly her kite alone. Shen Jue glanced down at her. Head bowed, she trudged silently through the snow dragging the large kite behind her. At least she was quiet, unlike the emperor. Shen Jue removed his cloak and draped it over the girl's shoulders, then ordered a nearby eunuch to carry her kite. She hesitated before handing it over.

"Is the kite very important to you?" asked Shen Jue.

Baili Yuan nodded gently. "My brother made it for me."

Her ill-fated brother had died of smallpox years ago. To have carried this kite all the way from the north—it was pitiful. "Are the palace servants

treating you well?” Shen Jue pressed. “If anything is amiss, Your Ladyship need only say the word.”

The girl was silent. She was likely afraid of causing trouble; even when mistreated, she wouldn’t speak up. Well, Shen Jue would just replace her attendants—that was a trivial matter for him. He led her through the Jingyang Gate. When the palace maids and eunuchs saw him and Baili Yuan, they swarmed over and knelt in the snow, trembling. They probably feared punishment for losing track of Baili Yuan; they shook like leaves, their faces pale.

Shen Jue frowned. “Useless fools. After the ceremony, report for flogging!”

The servants murmured their assent, still quivering. Shen Jue clasped his hands respectfully to Baili Yuan. “This servant will take his leave. Your Ladyship should prepare for the ceremony and be on time.”

Baili Yuan nodded and reached for the kite in the eunuch’s hands. But the eunuch’s sleeve accidentally snagged on the bamboo frame, ripping a small hole in the kite. The eunuch immediately dropped to the floor.

“Forgive this lowly one, Your Ladyship!”

Baili Yuan tilted her head. “You ruined the kite my brother gave me.”

“Do not fret, Your Ladyship,” said Shen Jue. “This servant will have the embroidery maids examine it. The tear is small—it can be mended.”

Baili Yuan looked up at Shen Jue, her dark eyes clear as water. “Will you kill him, Depot Chief?”

Had his reputation sunk so low? “Of course not,” Shen Jue reassured her. “A minor punishment will suffice.”

“It will? I heard that the depot chief was a villain, but it seems that you’re a good man after all.” Baili Yuan lowered her head.

Shen Jue was momentarily stunned—he’d met many people, but never one so blunt. Irritation flared, and he was about to leave when Baili Yuan suddenly pulled a hairpin from her bun and stabbed it into the eunuch’s eye. Blood gushed forth as the eunuch collapsed, howling and clutching his face.

Baili Yuan frowned at the man as he writhed. “Huh? You’re still alive?”

Everyone was aghast. Even Shen Jue was taken aback. Now he understood why the Jingyang Palace servants had been trembling. It wasn’t him they feared—it was Baili Yuan. As she raised the pin again, Shen Jue ordered that she be held back, then had the eunuch carried away. His blood dripped across the snow, stark red against white.

A few drops had splashed onto Baili Yuan’s snow-pale face. She wiped them off with her sleeve and said to Shen Jue, “I hurt your man. Will you punish me?”

Her pallor was like ice—beautiful but lifeless and unsettling to behold. Suppressing his unease, Shen Jue replied, “He damaged your kite first, Your Ladyship, so you could kill him outright. But today is an auspicious occasion, and His Majesty has forbidden bloodshed in the palace. Let it alone: This servant will keep it quiet. The ceremony is soon, so Your Ladyship should go prepare.”

“You have quite a silver tongue to twist this into my fault, Depot Chief.” Baili Yuan tossed the hairpin into the snow, her expression indifferent. Turning away, she continued, “I’ve heard that the depot chief has been aiding the cabinet in drastic reforms and cutting redundant officials—including even those in your own Eastern Depot. The reduction of feudal powers will begin in the new year, and will strip the titles of distant royal branches. Tell me, Depot Chief: Will that include a non-imperial marquis like me?”

“The founding emperor granted your title to your ancestors, Your Ladyship. Thus, as the direct heir of the Baili line, you are exempt.”

“I see.” Baili Yuan paused, scuffing the snow with her toe. “Where are you headed now, Depot Chief?”

“This servant must rouse His Majesty.”

“Why bother? Let him sleep. When he’s sleeping, all the power lies in your hands.”

Shen Jue’s eyes narrowed slightly. All of a sudden, this seemingly innocent twelve-year-old girl was no longer easy to read. Was she a meek victim of bullying, or a bloodthirsty noble? Did she fear that he’d reduce

her feudal powers, or was she indifferent to it? What did she truly want? His uncertainty unsettled him. He touched the tourmaline beads at his wrist. “Though you may be young, Your Ladyship, you should mind your words. This servant has duties to attend to.”

“I thought the depot chief was a demon. But it turns out that you’re a bodhisattva,” said Baili Yuan, adding, “Being loyal enough to do dirty work will end in ruin, Chief.”

“That’s none of your concern,” replied Shen Jue, his tone cool. “You should worry about yourself, Your Ladyship.” With that, he clasped his hands behind his back and walked away.

As Baili Yuan watched his retreating figure, the corners of her pale lips curled into a sinister smile so ghastly it made her resemble a demonic doll. “I wish the depot chief an eternity of glory,” she murmured softly. “Let his name be sung through the ages.”

Chapter 88:
Lord Yama Comes Collecting

DOZENS OF EASTERN DEPOT agents rushed through the narrow alleys like a volley of black arrows, forcing pedestrians and carriage drivers alike to beat a hasty retreat, their faces filled with alarm. Xiahou Lian was among them. He had a goose-quill saber at his waist, a hand crossbow strapped to his arm, and a musket tucked against his left thigh. No one spoke—there was only the men's muffled breathing and footsteps, sounding as solemn as those of an army on the march.

The alleys crisscrossed like the threads of a dense spiderweb, yet the agents took every turn without hesitation, as if they knew the capital's layout perfectly. Soon, they reached their destination: a brokerage firm on Deshengmen Avenue. The agents didn't need orders from Situ Jin: they fanned into the surrounding alleys seamlessly, like a silent black tide, dispersing in all directions before vanishing into thin air.

Meanwhile, Xiahou Lian followed Situ Jin. The pair crouched against a wall in an alley that led straight to the brokerage's main gate.

Brokerage firms were hubs for merchants transporting goods across the country, but this one was unlicensed—its owner lacked official permits, and its goods comprised untaxed contraband, typically just liquor or opium. The owner had been bribing local officials to look the other way, but today was different. The Xingqing Guild's leader had confessed that they'd sold all the goods they'd smuggled to this broker to offload in the capital.

Those goods were small black pills that were shrouded in mystery—even the Xingqing Guild's leader had never used them himself. They were reportedly called "Paradise Fruit," although members of the underworld, unimpressed by that poetic name, called them simply "Black Rations." The guild leader claimed that Black Rations induced a euphoric high like ascending to paradise—but the pills were lethally toxic. He'd once witnessed a man swallow thirty at once, only to bleed from all seven orifices and die within half the time it took an incense stick to burn.

Xiahou Lian peeked out to study the brokerage's entrance. Two lanterns hung from the eaves; beneath them stood two men bundled in tattered gray coats, rubbing their hands against the cold wind. As the men shifted, the short blades hidden under their clothes glinted. Each was about two feet long.

"Careful," Situ Jin murmured. "These are desperate men—many are wanted criminals."

"Unfortunately for them, so am I." Xiahou Lian checked his bolts and bullets. "Situ-laoge, I'll take point. You hang back."

Situ Jin frowned at him.

"You've got a family," explained Xiahou Lian. "If you get hurt, Lady Situ and Yu-jie will be heartbroken. I'm a lone wolf, so if I'm hurt, it won't matter." He patted Situ Jin's shoulder. "I heard that you two argued again yesterday. Everything all right?"

"If *you* were injured, it would upset the chief." Situ Jin sighed, his expression resigned. "Chasing down this Paradise Fruit keeps me out all night these days. Mingyue thinks I'm seeing someone else. The truth is, we don't even argue—she cries, and I comfort her."

Xiahou Lian had no experience comforting women—only Shen Jue. Since he couldn't offer advice, he just sighed sympathetically.

"The Eastern Depot's work is endless. I rarely have time to stay home with my family. Mingyue is sensitive, and what little time I have with her is wasted on quarrels." In the dim moonlight, Situ Jin's sharp features softened with rare melancholy. "She's always afraid of aging, convinced that she can't compete with younger women. It's not true. There's only one Mingyue—and she's the only one I've ever loved."

He pulled a slender redwood box from his robes and opened it to reveal an intricately filigreed gilded hairpin. "This is identical to the hairpin I gave her as a betrothal gift when we married. I found it a few days ago in Liulichang—they must've been a matching pair. Do you think she'll accept it as an apology?"

"Uh…" Xiahou Lian hesitated. "Maybe ask the chief later? He used to deal with women all the time—he'd know better than us."

Situ Jin nodded and tucked the box back into his robes, then stood to check the time.

“All right. Breach the door.”

Xiahou Lian strode out of the alley, brushing dust off his sleeves as he marched toward the brokerage. The night swallowed his figure, revealing only a tall, blurred silhouette. The guards noticed him and silently unsheathed their blades. Xiahou Lian continued to advance without a word.

The guards tensed. “Hey, what’re you—”

Before they could finish, two sharp whistles split the air as two black iron bolts shot forth and pierced their foreheads instantly. They collapsed without so much as a scream. Xiahou Lian caught the bodies before they hit the ground and propped them gently against the doorframe.

The waiting agents closed in silently, some scaling walls, others pushing open the gates to file in without a sound. Xiahou Lian and Situ Jin moved down the corridor, agents at their backs. The outer walkway was empty. They used their scabbards to nudge open the doors to the main hall. It was also deserted, the unlit room pitch-black. The agents stood back-to-back, alert to threats from all sides.

Xiahou Lian paused. Faint laughter drifted through the silence, seemingly from bedrooms at the back. He exchanged a glance with Situ Jin, and they crept up the creaking stairs with the chipped paint. Then they crossed a central hallway into a two-story building behind the brokerage. One room buzzed with raucous laughter and conversation from what sounded like a crowd inside. Xiahou Lian and Situ Jin took positions on either side of the door. Situ Jin mouthed a countdown.

“One, two, three!”

They burst in, crossbows raised to sweep the room—but the moment they entered, they froze, astounded by the sight before them. Behind layers of gauze curtains, amid the scent of wine and sweaty tangled limbs, a dozen men and women lay entwined, their naked bodies knotted together like those of serpents. Their faces were twisted with wild, grotesque grins as if they were no longer human but beasts driven by desire, snarling and biting at one another, so lost in their frenzy that they didn’t even notice the

intruders. The agents exchanged uneasy glances. The scene wasn't arousing—it was horrific.

One of the men in the room staggered to his feet, murmuring, "Celestial maiden, don't go… Don't leave…" He stumbled toward the window.

"Stop him!" Situ Jin barked.

Agents lunged forward to restrain him, but the man's strength was terrifying—he threw them off and leaped through the window, crashing onto the stones below. Xiahou Lian rushed to look; the man's skull had split on a jagged rock.

"What the hell…?" Xiahou Lian muttered, shaken.

"Leave them." Situ Jin said, ordering his men to fall back. He had some guard the door. "We'll deal with them when they sober up. The rest of you, gather all suspected Paradise Fruit and bring it to the main hall for the chief."

"Is Paradise Fruit some kind of aphrodisiac? Does it make groups of people go mad?" Xiahou Lian asked.

Situ Jin frowned hard; he didn't know either.

They waited in the hall for the time it took an incense stick to burn. When Shen Jue arrived, the frenzied orgy was still underway. Shen Jue took one look and returned pale; Xiahou Lian guessed that he would've bathed his eyes if circumstances allowed. Shen Jue took a pill from the confiscated stash, crushed it in his palm, and examined it under the lamplight.

"Well?" said Xiahou Lian.

"It looks like wanyao," Shen Jue mused. "The Byzantine Empire once offered something called 'theriac' in tribute, and it became known in the palace as wanyao. It caused numbness, and long-term use led to addiction. Emperor Shenzong neglected his court for twenty-three years, seldom seeing his ministers, precisely because he abused wanyao."

Xiahou Lian turned a pill between his fingers. "'Wanyao,' 'Black Rations,' 'Paradise Fruit'—what the hell is this stuff? How's it made?"

"From poppies, like Burmese white powder," Situ Jin answered. "The symptoms are the same: addiction, hallucinations, lust, physical decay. But

Burmese white powder is only found in Yunnan, and it costs a fortune. How did this reach the capital?”

Shen Jue pondered, then scraped up a fingernail’s worth of powder and tasted it.

“What are you doing?!” Xiahou Lian slapped at his hand.

Shen Jue dodged, scowling. “A small dose isn’t harmful. How else will I know what it is?”

“You—” Xiahou Lian cut off abruptly, and his eyes widened. “When you were developing the antidote for Seven Fifteen, did you test it like that too?”

Shen Jue nodded slightly. “I lacked the influence to recruit physicians at first, so I had to experiment myself.” He didn’t mention how he’d scoured medical texts, rare compendiums, and local records—how else would he finally have learned that Seven Fifteen was derived from azalea blossoms?

Xiahou Lian lowered his lashes and curled his fingers into Shen Jue’s sleeve. His heart ached as the gold-woven embroidery scratched his fingertips. Shen Jue was such a good man—how had Xiahou Lian failed to notice for so long?

Shen Jue took another dab of the drug and carefully scrutinized the taste, his frown deepening.

“Well?” asked Situ Jin.

Not responding, Shen Jue stood abruptly. Shen Wenxing approached with his cloak, but at a glance from Shen Jue, he knew to hand it to Xiahou Lian instead. Xiahou Lian draped the cloak over Shen Jue’s shoulders and fastened the gold clasps. The brocade’s subtle patterns were like flowing clouds shimmering in the lamplight.

Shen Jue studied Xiahou Lian’s face, so close to his. “If you met your old comrades, could you kill them?”

“Of course—I killed Shixin, after all. If one comes, I’ll kill them; if two come, I’ll kill them both.” Xiahou Lian smoothed the cloak’s folds. “I’m no longer a Garden assassin. Haven’t you heard? Rumor has it that the

Eastern Depot Chief Shen Jue keeps a mad dog—one that's loyal, vicious, and bites wherever it's pointed.'"

"Is that you? I thought that rumor was about Situ Jin."

"It's not about me," Situ Jin said dryly.

"They mean me," Xiahou Lian confirmed, winking at Shen Jue. "Woof, woof!"

"Idiot," Shen Jue chided. "Are you so proud of being someone's dog?"

"Not just anyone's dog. Yours."

Shen Jue couldn't help but laugh; his heart felt like a sparrowhawk soaring into the sky. But regardless of his joy, duty called. His smile faded, replaced by icy resolve. "Paradise Fruit contains more than just poppies—it's laced with azaleas. Poppies plus azaleas—if you use it, you'll end up addicted and delusional, and if you stop, you'll end up bleeding from all seven orifices. How frightening Qiye Garden is, profiting from this poison while committing atrocities. Situ, impose a citywide curfew that starts tomorrow. Order agents to sweep teahouses, brothels, taverns, and inns, shutting down all unlicensed operations. Burn any Paradise Fruit found on-site. And send these samples to the imperial hospital—see whether they can devise an antidote."

Situ Jin bowed. "Understood."

"Qiye Garden," Shen Jue murmured, gazing at the moon. "Now that you've come to my territory, I'll see to it that none of you leave alive."

The night was thick as ink when Situ Jin finally finished up at the Eastern Depot. The watchman's drum sounded from the alley's depths—it was the second watch. At least he could still get a few hours' sleep. He urged his horse homeward.

He still lived in the same house three blocks past Longxing Bridge, in the fourth alley on the left. And the hairpin he'd bought for Mingyue was still tucked safely in his robes, nestled near his heart, as if in a sacred spot. The streets were empty. Clouds swallowed the moon, and the darkness crept in like a thin fog. A few households had hung lanterns outside—fist-sized lights that flickered in the wind and snow. His horse was fast, and it had

soon crossed the bridge and turned, but it suddenly balked as they approached the third alley. No matter how he urged it, the horse refused to take another step. Situ Jin frowned, unease prickling his skin.

Fine. It was just a short walk from this point, so he dismounted and led the horse. The beast snorted, planting its hooves stubbornly. Resigned, Situ Jin stood in the snow, weighing his options. A lone leaf danced into view on a current of wind, and he stared at it, watching its withered edges flutter like the wings of a dying butterfly. Then there was a rustling noise.

Without warning, the leaf split in midair as if sliced by an invisible blade. The halves drifted apart.

Situ Jin's pupils contracted, his body freezing. The moon emerged to reveal a decapitated dog half-buried in the snow, its neck cleanly severed. No wonder the horse had balked—the cold may have dulled Situ Jin's nose, but the horse had smelled the blood. It was a warhorse that had fought with him in the north and could sense danger as keenly as he could.

Situ Jin drew his saber, slicing the air before him. An invisible wire resisted the blade. He pressed down, and a gleam of moonlight revealed the legendary Qianji Thread—the signature weapon of Qiye Garden's Wuminggui, Xiahou Lian. That fool was probably still wagging his tail for Shen Jue. Situ Jin reflected on the pair, so clearly in love yet dawdling. *Hurry up,* he thought. *Or you might end up like me, your words left forever unspoken.*

Footsteps sounded behind him. He turned to see a tall, lean figure standing in the snow, blade in hand, face hidden behind a white porcelain mask with two dark eyeholes.

This was a true assassin, silent as a ghost borne on the wind. He spoke, his voice young and indifferent.

"I am the Garuda of Qiye Garden, come to send Lord Situ to paradise."

Chapter 89:
Snow Buries the Withered Courtyard

“WHO BOUGHT MY DEATH?” Situ Jin asked.

“No one. The Garden itself wants you dead.”

“I see. So I’m that important?” Situ Jin’s voice was low. “If the Garden wants me dead, does it openly oppose the Eastern Depot now?”

“I don’t know. We ask no questions, and we kill without restraint. I’m just a blade. I kill who I’m told.”

“A blade…” Situ Jin chuckled faintly. “Are you like Xiahou Lian? Did you earn your place as the Garuda with puppets and strings?”

“No. With the blade,” the Garuda said. “One strike—that’s all it’ll take to kill you.”

“Oh? I’ve crossed blades with Xiahou Pei, who possessed the fiercest swordplay I’ve ever seen. Who could be stronger than her?”

Situ Jin adjusted his breathing and inched closer. The assassin mirrored his steps. They circled each other in the center of the street, ten paces apart.

The assassin shook his head silently.

“What’s your name?” asked Situ Jin.

“The Garuda.”

“Your real name!”

“Assassins have no names.”

They struck simultaneously. The air thickened, even the wind slowing to a drawn-out howl. Snowflakes swirled around them, but Situ Jin saw the assassin clearly—the empty eyes behind the mask were cold as eternal ice.

What kind of assassin was this? He seemed to be a heartless weapon that existed only to kill.

Situ Jin hid his blade behind his elbow, concealing its angle so his enemy couldn't evade the fatal strike; it was his signature technique. He and his foe clashed like two black owls taking flight, their sleeves flaring like wings, blades departing their sheaths with a steely rasp. A sliver of light flashed where they crossed like a crack in the air itself, then they parted and stood back-to-back in the snow.

Silence.

Then a drip—and another drip. Blood had finally been shed. Situ Jin looked down and saw crimson staining the snow at his feet. Only then did he register the sharp pain in his waist, his warm blood cooling instantly into frost as it seeped out. *Too fast*, he thought as terror gripped him. Such speed would have overwhelmed even Xiahou Pei. The assassin had spoken the truth: One strike was all it had taken. Situ Jin hadn't even had time to swing. Now he would die. A long gash split his right side. He'd bleed out soon.

Suddenly, the Garuda spoke. "Go home."

Situ Jin looked up.

The assassin turned, retracting Qianji Threads with a flick of his wrist; the wires glinted as they vanished into his palm. "The dossier said that you have a wife and daughter," he added.

Situ Jin's breath hitched. "They have nothing to do with the Eastern Depot."

"I know." The assassin's voice softened. "It's cold—you'll bleed out more slowly. We're two hundred and seventy-eight steps from your door. If you walk fast, you'll make it home before you bleed yourself dry—but don't walk too fast. That'll hasten it."

"You…" Situ Jin smiled bitterly. "What is this? An assassin's mercy?"

The assassin's voice was soft. "I didn't want to kill you, but I had no choice. I'm just a blade. Go home. At least…say goodbye. I've always regretted not saying goodbye to my little brother. I hope…you won't share that regret."

Leaning on his saber, Situ Jin staggered home step by step. The nameless assassin watched from behind, his black silhouette dissolving into the snow.

Soon, Situ Jin no longer felt the pain—whether from cold or blood loss, he didn't know. He just prayed to hold on a little longer. He struggled for every breath, his ragged gasps sounding like a broken bellows. Finally, he saw the wall of his residence. He clung to it, inching toward the gate, pushing it open, and stumbling into the courtyard. Then he dragged himself to the door. His blood dripped onto the snow, only to be blanketed by fresh snowflakes.

Inside, the brazier hissed. He heard Mingyue and Yu-jie's steady breathing. Relief washed over him—the Garden had left them unharmed. He lifted the blue bed-curtain—Yu-jie was sleeping within, Mingyue curled around her.

He caressed Yu-jie's cheek, then gently shook Mingyue's shoulder. "Mingyue…Mingyue."

Her eyes fluttered open, still bleary with sleep, and there was a flicker of surprise on her features as she shifted to face Situ Jin. She looked pale, and in the faint light and shadow, Situ Jin could just make out the tear tracks on her cheeks. She'd been yearning for him, longing for him to return home.

"Sorry I'm back so late." He brushed her cheek.

His hand was icy—she shivered, but clutched it nonetheless.

"Not late," she said. "You're home. That's all that matters." She tucked his hand against her chest. "You're home."

He pulled out a redwood box and offered it to her. "I bought you a hairpin. Do you like it?"

"We've been married for so long—why waste money like this?" she chided. "You don't make that much. Come, change your clothes and sleep. You have duties tomorrow—rest while you can."

"I want a hug." His voice was hoarse.

He gazed at her. Her skin was slightly sallow, and years of toil had left her visibly weary. Her eyes were swollen from crying herself to sleep.

Yet he thought she was still the most beautiful woman in the world. His eyes traced her face and he memorized every detail, etching her into his soul. That way, he'd never forget her, even in the next life.

Mingyue sighed but relented, embracing him gently. He was an accomplished, full-grown man, yet he could still be so childish. His skin felt cold due to the chill outside, so she held him tighter, willing warmth into him.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," whispered Situ Jin. "I shouldn't have argued."

Mingyue buried her face in his chest. "It wasn't your fault; it was mine. Besides, you never argue—it's always just me bullying you."

"I love you, Mingyue. Always have." Situ Jin inhaled her scent with deep fondness. She had a unique fragrance like the aroma of some flower. It soothed him.

"All right, all right, I know," she said, laughing. "What's gotten into you? I suppose even trees made of steel can bloom. Confess—are you apologizing because you did something terrible?"

Situ Jin shook his head. "I'm not going to work anymore. I'll stay home with you. Is that all right?"

"Of course. I've wanted to tell you—the Eastern Depot's too much. You leave early and come home late. It's not worth it. We've saved up—we can start a business and open a clinic. I'll be the doctor, and you'll be my assistant. If you quit, let's move to Jinling! They say it's beautiful—begonia in spring, red lotuses in summer, maples in autumn. Talk to the chief about it. If he refuses, *I'll* talk to him."

"All right. Whatever you say."

Exhaustion overwhelmed him. His eyelids grew heavy, impossible to lift. He leaned against the bedpost and slowly closed his eyes.

Moonlight filtered through the window, the lattice cutting it into patches. Outside, bare branches cast sparse shadows like ink paintings. Situ Jin went still. Mingyue tried to start undressing him for bed. Her hand brushed his; it was still icy, as if it were frozen. Strange. He'd been inside long enough—why wasn't he warming up? She lifted his hand to her lips to

blow warmth into it—and realized it was caked with dried blood. Her mind went blank, and she froze, slowly raising her gaze.

Moonlight bathed Situ Jin's white, bloodless face in a jade-like luster. At last, she understood—and far too late. Her tears spilled over.

"A-Jin—!"

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THE ASSASSIN SLIPPED into a narrow alley. He'd stashed his everyday clothes under a basket he'd left outside someone's door. Once he found them, he set down his blade, shed his black archer's garb, and donned a faded gray coat.

A man emerged from the shadows and picked up the blade. The moonlight caught the two characters etched into the steel, which read *Chana*. "You shouldn't have let him go, Chiyan."

Chiyan ignored the man and turned to walk away.

"Don't think being the Garuda exempts you from the Garden's rules. You were expected to 'Kill him and take his head.' You should've taken it. The man's voice was venomous. As your sheath, I'll be reporting everything to the Yama."

"Do as you please."

"Your arrogance is what I hate most about you, Chiyan. Don't forget—you're just like us. We survive only by taking Paradise Fruit. Actually, you're lower than us; you have to surrender even your Chana, and a bladeless assassin is just meat on a chopping block." The man's voice began to fade into the distance. "Remember: Next time a contract comes, fetch your blade at the apothecary in Mentougou. I work there now."

Returning to Yunxian Tower, Chiyan was greeted with the flirtatious laughter of men and women, slick and saccharine. He ignored the sounds, heading to the rear courtyard to wash his hands in the cistern of fortune—blood from the kill had to be scrubbed away quickly. Back in the unlit,

unheated woodshed, darkness clung like a chill. He stood there a moment, then retrieved a half-gnawed letter from a bundle beneath his bed.

Written in the letter were Xiahou Pei's last words to Xiao Lian. Chiyan had found it when he returned from the north to the Garden's former location. Xiahou Pei's terrible handwriting was nearly illegible; he spent three days deciphering it. She told Xiao Lian to find someone called "little Shaoye," saying she'd arranged a way out for him; she'd also left him a three-courtyard house in the capital to reside in with his future wife.

Chiyan spent days visiting neighborhoods and inquiring about every three-courtyard house, but it turned out that each one had a "Shaoye," and he found no trace of Xiao Lian even after tailing them all. Maybe "Shaoye" was just a title, like "Garuda." Chiyan hugged his knees in the dark, his gaze hollow.

"Xiahou!" The madam's voice rang from outside. "Slacking off again?!"

Chiyan started. He hid the letter before stepping out to do the laundry.

The madam began nagging behind him. "Ugh! I only hired you because you seemed honest, but it turns out that you always slack off—this pile has been here for three days now! The last Xiahou washed three loads a day, but you? One load in three days! No wonder he got a lucky break, while you're stuck here wasting your life." She glared at him. "Listen—no sleep until this is done! I'm utterly exhausted dealing with all these damn men, and now you too!"

Chiyan silently filled the wash basin with water. It was huge, large enough to fit a grown man, and piled high with the courtesans' garments. Yesterday, the guards had complained that washing their clothes was too much work, and they'd dumped their laundry in too. There were just too many clothes. Chiyan spent his days searching for his brother, his nights killing, and his dawns hauling bathwater for A-Chu. There was really no free time left.

But he said nothing, just scrubbed mechanically.

The madam poked his forehead with her handkerchief. "If you weren't so honest, I'd have kicked you out long ago!"

She abandoned him to wash in the snow. He worked steadily, laundering each garment. The night was too dark; it was impossible to spot stains in the moonlight. Hours passed, and a small mountain of clothes still loomed within the basin. He couldn't imagine how the last errand boy had washed three loads a day. Maybe Chiyan was just stupid. He kept scrubbing, his brow furrowed.

"Xiahou, your sister's here!" A-Chu sang out.

Chiyan turned, puzzled, to see A-Chu leading a little girl through the hanging flower gate. The girl held a large tiger kite. She grinned at him.

"Gege!" called Baili Yuan.

"Didn't you say that you came to the capital to find your brother, Xiahou?" asked A-Chu. "How'd he become your sister?"

"My gege's a bit stupid, always getting things wrong," Baili Yuan said as she approached Chiyan, showing him the kite. "Gege, I found a dog hole and crawled out to play. Wasn't I smart? But a bad man broke the kite you made me. Fix it for me?"

Chiyan didn't take the kite; he just examined the tear on the tiger's head.

A-Chu crouched before Baili Yuan. The little girl was pretty—clean face, big dark eyes. The longer she looked, the more A-Chu liked her; the girl reminded her of herself when she'd been a child. She pulled out a pouch of pine-nut candies and pressed it into the girl's hands with a smile. "Here. Have some sweets."

"Thank you, pretty jiejie." Baili Yuan eyed the pouch. It had been tucked against A-Chu's bosom for too long—it had picked up her fragrance. Baili Yuan wrinkled her nose, a little repulsed; she wanted to toss it away.

"Oh, such a sweet mouth—I can't take it!" A-Chu giggled. "Jiejie *loves* being called pretty. Here—let me give you a kiss!"

Baili Yuan blinked, startled. Before she could react, A-Chu planted a loud kiss on her cheek.

"So sweet!" A-Chu stood, brushing off her skirts. "All right. Jiejie's off to bed. You get to sleep early, too. Don't wander around—it's dangerous here. If the mama catches you, you'll be in big trouble."

Baili Yuan stared at her with an ambivalent expression. “Oh,” she muttered, though it was unclear whether she’d listened to what A-Chu said. “She kissed me,” she muttered to herself, then looked up at Chiyan. “What are you doing?”

“Washing clothes.”

Baili Yuan peered into the basin, overflowing with robes, skirts, men’s undershirts, socks, chest wraps, corsets, and waist sashes that could belong to either men or women. Her face darkened. “You’ve never washed *my* clothes, have you?”

“No.”

Baili Yuan relaxed. “Good.”

A-Chu disappeared into the distance, and the clamor of Yunxian Tower gradually faded. Most of the guests had likely tired and brought the courtesans and entertainers back to their rooms to sleep. The quiet courtyard held only Chiyan and Baili Yuan. Withered trees filled the space, their skeletal branches casting deep shadows on the ground.

Wind chimes suddenly tinkled, the delicate notes sounding as figure after figure emerged from the darkness; it was as if demons had crawled from hell on the wind and snow to descend upon the mortal world. These were the Garden’s Eight Legions—the strongest assassins and most vicious ghosts under the Yama’s command. The assassins stepped into the moonlight and bowed reverently before Baili Yuan.

“Lord Yama, the Garuda failed to sever Situ Jin’s head, violating the Garden’s rules,” the Gandharva reported.

Baili Yuan turned to look at Chiyan, who remained focused on washing clothes, ignoring everyone. She walked over and touched his face. “You’ve been naughty, Chiyan.”

Chiyan silently lifted his gaze to hers.

“But I won’t punish you. You’re like me—we’re the same. You’re the only one who can keep me company.” Baili Yuan’s smile was radiant. “Chiyan, do you know why I followed you that day at Zijin Pass?”

Chiyan said nothing.

“It was your eyes. When I saw them, I knew we were the same.” She traced his tranquil brows. His pupils were large and black, as empty as the desolate snowfields of the north—just like hers. “We have no ties to this world. On the contrary, we’re monsters it can’t accept! Monsters belong with other monsters, Chiyan.”

“I have a tie to this world,” Chiyan said. “Xiao-Lian. He’s my brother. We share the same blood.”

“The same blood? You actually believe in that?” Baili Yuan sneered. “You use Xiahou as your fake name, but do you really accept the woman who abandoned you as your mother?”

Chiyan shook his head. “I use ‘Xiahou’ because of Xiao-Lian.”

Baili Yuan’s smile turned to ice. “So you love him that much? Give up. I’ll find him and kill him—then you’ll belong entirely to me.”

Chiyan silently lowered his head and resumed scrubbing.

Duan Jiu emerged from under the eaves. “Lord Yama, the Paradise Fruit has been distributed. The criminal worlds of the north and south, the three major canal guilds, and the twenty-four factions now all follow our orders. Last night, though, the Eastern Depot confiscated a batch meant for sale in the capital. I’ll send men to destroy it.”

“Good,” Baili Yuan said with a chilling smile. “A eunuch trying to safeguard the empire—how laughable. So stubborn, this Shen Jue. The grand edifice is about to crumble; does his insignificant self really think he has any hope of saving it? My ancestors cowered in the shadows, afraid to be anything more than rats ruling the sewers. But now, I will split this world asunder and watch it collapse! Only when light retreats can darkness reign supreme.”

Duan Jiu bowed deeply. “We pledge our lives to you, my lord!”

Baili Yuan surveyed the courtyard. The walkway’s scarlet pillars were draped with red silk, and the gilded lanterns cast soft light; the distant side rooms glowed faintly, vermilion railings dusted with snow. It was the picture of tranquility.

“This place is nice,” she said indifferently. “Have everyone here take the Paradise Fruit—the madam, the courtesans, even the gatekeepers. Spare

no one.”

“Yes,” the assassins said, bowing as they withdrew.

Baili Yuan watched them go indifferently, then realized she was holding something. She looked down to see the pine-nut candies that woman had given to her. They were in a garish gold-red pouch embroidered with a haphazard butterfly-and-flower pattern—likely the woman’s own handiwork. The craftsmanship was atrocious, hideous beyond words. Baili Yuan frowned at it for a moment, then said, “Leave out that courtesan named A-Chu. Keep her in the dark.”

“As you command, Lord Yama.”

Chapter 90:
A Gentleman Dies for His Bosom Friend

A CLOTH CANOPY HAD BEEN erected before the mourning hall. Beneath it, several monks chanted sutras in low voices. The door to the hall was open, and snowflakes drifted inside and settled on Mingyue's hair, making it look as if she'd gone gray overnight.

Xiahou Lian lit incense and stepped aside. He felt grief, but also a sense of unreality—how could someone he had spoken with just the previous night be dead today? Most of the mourners were his colleagues. Situ Jin had been a good man whose kindness had benefited many, and agents lined up to offer incense and pay their respects before silently retreating.

The lingering Buddhist chants wove a shroud of sorrow over the mourning hall. Xiahou Lian soon felt suffocated and stepped outside for air as a group emerged from behind the screen wall: Shen Jue, Shen Wenxing, and others. Shen Jue had come directly from the palace, riding hard through the snow; his black gauze cap and cloak were now dusted white. He glanced at Xiahou Lian and moved to enter when a small, pale hand tugged his sleeve. He turned to see a tiny figure in mourning clothes stare up at him with wide eyes.

Shen Jue recognized her—it was Situ Jin's daughter, Situ Nongyu.

"Uncle Chief, when will Daddy wake up?" Yu-jie asked, biting her finger. "He's been sleeping so long—he promised to give me a horsey ride." At four years old, she didn't yet understand that her father would never wake—that he wouldn't be there to give her horsey rides ever again.

For the first time, Shen Jue was at a loss. The two stared at each other in silence for a long moment.

Xiahou Lian came to crouch beside her, patting her head. "Daddy will wake up when you're all grown, Yu-jie, so you must listen to your mama and grow up well."

Yu-jie tilted her head. “Won’t Daddy get hungry if he sleeps for so long?”

“Daddy is an immortal now,” Xiahou Lian said. “Immortals don’t need to eat.”

“But what if I want to play with Daddy?” Yu-jie mumbled, staring at her toes. “Daddy was always away, and he never played with me. What if I want to talk to him?”

Xiahou Lian took her small hand. “When you miss Daddy, you can talk to the stars. When Daddy hears you, he’ll visit your dreams while you sleep.”

“Really?”

“Of course,” Xiahou Lian vowed, thumping his chest. “My mother is an immortal too. Whenever I miss her, I talk to the stars, and she visits my dreams to share a drink with me. But sometimes she’s out doing work, so she can’t hear me and doesn’t come. You must be patient and wait, Yu-jie.”

Yu-jie studied Xiahou Lian, doubtful, before she finally nodded emphatically and ran off to play in the snow with her maid.

“She’ll find out the truth eventually,” Shen Jue said.

“Buying time is enough for now. She’s so young—let her be happy a little longer.”

Shen Jue watched Yu-jie’s figure retreat for a moment, then turned to offer incense in the mourning hall. When she saw him, Mingyue rose and curtsied. She was no longer crying, and her tears had dried, but her colorless face remained so pale it nearly blended into the snow.

Shen Jue took a stick of incense and placed it in the gilded burner. Situ Jin lay beneath the canopy, peaceful, as if asleep. Shen Jue remembered their first meeting: Situ Jin had just fought Xiahou Pei and was badly injured. Even so, he had warned Shen Jue to stick to well-lit paths and beware assassins lurking in the shadows. He had always been kindhearted—stern in appearance but fussy, even a busybody.

Mingyue brought over tea, but Shen Jue didn’t take it. It was like he’d forgotten how to lift a cup with his right-hand man gone.

“What will you do now?” he asked Mingyue.

She set the cup down. “I’ll take Yu-jie to the northern frontiers first. A-Jin’s hometown is there, and I’d like to see it. After that, we’ll go south. I’ve saved money to open a clinic.”

“It will be hard on you as a lone woman. The court will provide a pension. You needn’t toil so hard.”

Mingyue shook her head softly. “This was our shared dream.”

After a silence, Shen Jue asked abruptly, “Did Situ ever tell you that he once saved my life?”

Mingyue shook her head, her expression blank.

“It was in the twenty-sixth year of Xuanhe,” Shen Jue recalled. “During the imperial hunt, someone injured the prince of Fu’s horse, and it went mad. Wei De pushed me into its path to shield himself, but Situ shot the horse down before it reached me. The prince’s leg was damaged, but I was unharmed. Later, Situ was exiled to the borderlands. I was just a minor eunuch in the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard at the time, powerless to intervene. In the end, I still owed him—so if you ever face hardship, come to me.”

Mingyue shook her head gently. “But you later saved my life and transferred A-Jin to the Eastern Depot, Chief. You owe him nothing.”

“I do.” Shen Jue gazed at the candles on the altar. “Situ Jin risked his life for a stranger. When I helped you, I was already in power, and it cost me nothing. My debt remains.” He turned and beckoned Shen Wenxing. “Dispatch a guard unit from the residence to escort Lady Situ.”

“Chief—” Mingyue began to refuse.

Shen Jue cut her off. “The northern frontiers border the desert; they’re unstable nowadays. A woman and child shouldn’t go alone. The guards will be yours to command henceforth. No need to consult me.”

Mingyue stopped trying to protest. She bowed. “Thank you, Chief.”

Shen Jue lingered a moment before turning to leave. After a few steps, he paused again. “I’ll inform you if there are developments in Situ’s case.”

Mingyue smiled wanly. “No need. A-Jin is gone, and killing his murderer wouldn’t bring him back. My only wish now is for Yu-jie to grow up in safety.”

Shen Jue nodded. “As you wish. But leave this matter to me—I, Shen Jue, repay grievances tenfold. I will collect this debt for Situ.”

With that, he strode out; Xiahou Lian followed. As they headed down the winding walkway and neared the gate, Mingyue’s voice suddenly called out behind them.

“Chief!”

Shen Jue turned.

Mingyue bowed deeply from where she stood beyond the threshold. “A-Jin was always glad to have met you. For your recognition, he could offer nothing but his life. I hope you’ll take good care of yourself, Chief. That way, A-Jin’s spirit will rest in peace.” She picked up Yu-jie, who’d just run over, and slowly returned to the mourning hall. The gate creaked shut behind her, leaving Shen Jue to gaze at the blue-black doors hung with white banners, the faded couplets, and the two stone lions covered in snow.

Shen Jue and Xiahou Lian rode out of the alley, flanked by tight-packed courtyard homes with gray walls and white tiles muted in the snow. After they’d reached the road, Shen Jue asked Xiahou Lian, “Did the coroner find anything unusual when he examined the body?”

“Situ had only one wound, three inches below the ribs,” Xiahou Lian replied. “It was a single, fatal attack. He died from blood loss.”

“A single attack?” Shen Jue frowned. “Situ was a skilled fighter—he would’ve fought back. He’s a genuine practitioner of the Blizzard Saber technique, and he earned the rank of top martial scholar at fourteen.”

“I know—I sparred with him at the training grounds, and I only just managed to win.” Xiahou Lian ran his fingers along the scabbard of his goose-quill saber and took a deep breath. “Situ had drawn his blade, but there was no blood on it. Whoever he was facing was extremely skilled—they attacked so fast that Situ didn’t even have time to counter.”

Who could it have been? Xiahou Lian hadn’t been involved in the martial world for years, and he had no idea who the best current swordsmen might be. He frowned, thinking. The fastest blade he’d ever seen was Chiyan’s. If Situ Jin had faced Chiyan, survival would indeed have been impossible. But Chiyan had disappeared. Even if he’d returned, he’d have no reason to rejoin the Garden now that Shixin was dead.

Was Chiyan still alive? Was the Garden behind Situ Jin's death? Situ had been ambushed immediately after the Eastern Depot confiscated the Paradise Fruit, and his attacker had had such a swift blade that they could only be a highly trained assassin. Xiahou Lian's head throbbed, his mind in turmoil. Matters related to the Garden always unsettled him.

Suddenly, a hand clapped his shoulder. He looked up and met Shen Jue's eyes. "Shaoye, how are you always so calm?" he asked, smiling bitterly.

Shen Jue's gaze flickered, and he averted his eyes. "I'm not always calm."

They rode a bit farther, then turned a corner. The site of Situ Jin's murder lay just ahead. Agents had cordoned it off—not that it mattered, since the snowy streets were empty.

Shen Jue dismounted to inspect the scene. There was nothing unusual—just gray earthen walls on either side and a few dead camphor trees stretching over the street from neighboring courtyards, their gnarled branches casting sparse shadows on the snow.

"We haven't found anything here, Chief," an agent reported. "Just a frozen dog carcass—though, strangely, it was decapitated."

"Could the killer have done it?" Shen Wenxing muttered skeptically. "Maybe they chopped off the dog's head to keep it from barking and drawing attention."

The carcass was frozen solid. As Xiahou Lian examined its severed neck, his frown deepened.

"What a clean cut," Shen Wenxing remarked, peering over. "How fast must their blade have been to leave a wound like this?"

"No—it's not from a blade," Xiahou Lian murmured. He fitted the dog's head back atop the body; between them was a hair-thin red line, nearly invisible.

"Then what's it from?" asked Shen Wenxing.

Xiahou Lian stood, his expression grim. "Qianji Thread."

Shen Wenxing looked baffled. "Qianji Thread? Isn't that what you used to control Zhaoye? It can slit throats, too?"

Xiahou Lian shook his head and walked to Shen Jue's side. "I have bad news."

"The Garden killed Situ?"

"Yes. After I killed Shixin, I left the Qianji Thread behind. But that's not all. Just *having* the thread isn't enough—you need to know the technique for wielding it." Xiahou Lian's fists slowly clenched. "So Tang Shiqi's been captured."

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TANG SHIQI TIPTOED INTO the Eastern Depot's duty office. It was a rest day, and aside from the rotating guards, the compound was nearly empty. Thanks to the disguise techniques he learned from his former boss, he'd made it this far without incident. But now that he was deep inside, he realized the idiot assassin who'd given him the map had only drawn the half of the building where the Paradise Fruit were stored, omitting the other half entirely.

The Eastern Depot was sprawling, fattened on embezzled wealth. The complex's layout twisted and turned, with pavilions and branching walkways every other step. Tang Shiqi had no idea how to retrace his steps. He was well and truly stuck.

At least this duty office was secluded—it would likely be a while before anyone came by. Tang Shiqi bolted the door and began to rifle through the room, hoping to stumble upon a map. The office was elegantly furnished: a plain desk, an incense burner resembling a mountain, a bamboo curtain hanging over the partition. Whoever worked there clearly held some high rank. A large cabinet stood against the wall; its upper shelves held books, the lower ones, their contents hidden, were likely for scrolls.

Tang Shiqi picked the cabinet's lock with a thin wire; sure enough, scrolls were stacked inside. He sat on the floor and unrolled them one by one. The artist was skilled—each stroke brimmed with life, vividly capturing the subject's features. After looking at several scrolls, he realized that they all depicted the same man. One portrayed him leaning against a

window, holding a jug of wine; in another, he rode horseback down a long street; and in yet another, he bent his head as he crafted a lantern.

Tang Shiqi was about to move on when he pulled out the innermost scroll and unfurled it.

His jaw dropped. It was the same man, but unlike the dignified portraits preceding it, this one showed him asleep, his robe slipping off to reveal his right shoulder, chest, and abdomen. The man was clearly a martial artist; his muscled flesh was rendered in exquisite detail, scars and all. The brushwork carried an unmistakable tenderness—even those scars were depicted with an odd beauty. The man's robe parted just below his waist, and there the brushstrokes halted, as if the artist had stopped themselves from going further.

Tang Shiqi's eyes traveled upward. A red seal stamped squarely on the man's bare chest caught his attention—imperious yet strangely intimate.

Seal of Shen Jue.

Chapter 91:
For Your Sake

SHEN JUE AND XIAHOU LIAN returned to the Eastern Depot. It was a rest day, and the compound was quiet. They headed straight for the duty office, where an assortment of documents on Qiye Garden awaited them.

Rest days didn't exist for Shen Jue. While others slept in or enjoyed themselves with their families, he still had to diligently review reports and draft responses. Palace memorials couldn't leave the inner court nor could the Eastern Depot's missives be casually moved, so he shuttled endlessly between the two locations. As soon as he finished one pile, another awaited.

The duty office was warmed by a brazier, the air lightly scented. Documents sat in neat stacks on the desk. Shen Jue and Xiahou Lian sat down and began to read. Shen Jue picked up lineage records detailing Qiye Garden's past abbots and former Eight Legions. The Garden had been founded at the start of the Great Qi dynasty, and it had seen twenty-one abbots over the preceding three centuries. The Eight Legions had changed more quickly—the "Mahoraga" title alone had forty-eight generations.

Each entry began with a portrait, which was followed by a biography and chronological record. Shixin's record ended in the thirtieth year of Xuanhe, when he was killed by the twenty-ninth Garuda, Xiahou Lian. Shixin's predecessor Duxin had had a refined appearance, his brows suggesting openness. However, his biography and chronology both cut off midway through.

Flipping back, Shen Jue noticed many other incomplete entries. He looked up at Xiahou Lian. "Why are some of the records unfinished?"

"I don't know," Xiahou Lian said. "The Garden taught us their history when I was a kid, but I either slept through the lessons or snuck out to catch loaches. I never paid attention."

"And your mother never told you?"

Xiahou Lian chuckled. "She was the one who took me loach-fishing."

Shen Jue massaged his temples. Apparently, Xiahou Lian's disregard for learning was hereditary.

Eleven of the twenty abbots had incomplete records. The Eight Legions' records showed similar gaps. The compilation was haphazard—abbots and legions were listed separately, forcing the reader to cross-reference timelines. As he perused the documents, though, Shen Jue found that some of the omissions in the records of abbots and their Legions aligned, while others didn't. He wasn't sure why. With no answers forthcoming, he set the conundrum aside for later.

Next, he turned to the records on different Garudas, stopping at Xiahou Lian's entry. The portrait showed a younger Xiahou Lian clad in black hemp robes holding the sheathed Hengbo, his eyes brimming with the lethal ferocity of a lone wolf prowling the wilderness. His biography read:

Xiahou Lian, once known as the Wuminggui. Wields Jingtie and Hengbo. Skilled in killing with puppets and Qianji Thread. Mother: Xiahou Pei, the twenty-eighth Garuda, alias Avoru, wielder of Hengbo. Father: Shixin, the twenty-first abbot and twenty-seventh Garuda, wielder of Bushenglian. Lian was an unruly child who terrorized the countryside. He once gathered five boys from the Garden's village to urinate on the monastery wall, competing to achieve the greatest distance. Lian won, earning the title "Qiye Garden's Pissing King." The village boys prostrated themselves in awe. When Shixin learned of this, he banished the boys and forbade them from playing with Lian. Thereafter, Lian roamed the forests alone, driving away the fish and birds. For years, the mountains fell silent.

Who could've imagined that the once-feared Wuminggui had participated in such a competition as a child—and emerged victorious as Pissing King?

Shen Jue glanced up at Xiahou Lian, who continued to pore diligently over the documents. His usual carefree demeanor had given way to a solemn, almost icy intensity, and his focused expression suited him. He was a man tempered by bloodshed, after all—and when he knitted his brows, the air turned as frigid as winter. There was no time to crack a joke now. Shen Jue returned to the records.

Snowflakes pattered against the window as they read for hours. When Shen Jue eventually stood to stretch, he found himself dizzy from sitting too

long. Xiahou Lian steadied him from behind.

“You’re swooning already?” Xiahou Lian pressed a hand to Shen Jue’s forehead. “No fever, though.”

Shen Jue brushed him off. “I sat for too long.”

Xiahou Lian laughed. “You’re so fragile. Tomorrow, I’ll take you running. We’ll lap the imperial city twice.”

“Get lost.” Shen Jue reached for the Garden records again.

“Rest,” Xiahou Lian said, plucking the documents from his hands. He jerked his chin toward a daybed. “Lie down for a bit.”

“I’m fine to keep reading a little longer.”

Xiahou Lian clicked his tongue, then suddenly stepped forward. Looping his right arm around Shen Jue’s shoulders and sliding his left under his knees, he lifted Shen Jue clean off the ground. Shen Jue stiffened in shock, glaring at Xiahou Lian and demanding to be put down at once. Xiahou Lian, unfazed, carried him to the daybed and bent to remove his boots. When Shen Jue tried to sit up, Xiahou Lian pushed him back down.

“Xiahou Lian!” Shen Jue’s glare could have flayed skin. “Rebelling, are you?”

Xiahou Lian studied him for a moment, then sighed. “Shaoye, even if you read every document today, you still won’t be able to track down the Garden overnight or avenge Situ right away.”

Shen Jue froze, and a silence fell between them, broken only by the whisper of snow against the window. The world seemed to hold its breath. At last, Shen Jue gave up struggling; his arms went slack as he collapsed back onto the daybed. Then he lifted one arm to cover his eyes.

“I’m so tired, Xiahou Lian,” Shen Jue murmured from under his arm. “The holdouts are constantly undermining me because of these new reforms. I’ve banned selling offices in the Eastern Depot, so the eunuchs no longer have any bribes to skim—some are already looking for opportunities to strike at me. That’s manageable, at least—but the borders are beyond my reach. There’s a drought in Liaodong, and the barbarians there are stirring trouble. The locals there can’t defend themselves at all—according to military reports, less than one in ten beacon towers remain. Just yesterday,

we got news that raiders have seized Nanyaozhou Fort and may push south. The cabinet wants to mobilize troops, but when I asked the Ministry of Revenue for funds, the minister opened the treasury and showed me its contents. We have no silver. And now the Garden…”

He lowered his arm and turned to bury his face in a cushion. “Internal strife. External threats. Wei De executed too many capable men—there’s no one useful left. And Situ…” His fists clenched. “The Garden!”

Xiahou Lian's heart ached. Shen Jue was described as a eunuch, but he shouldered an emperor's burdens. While the real emperor played, the weight of the realm was crushing Shen Jue's shoulders. No wonder he was exhausted. Now, in another brutal blow, he'd lost his right-hand man—Xiahou Lian tugged his sleeve. "What about me? I'm here. Promote me, and let me handle the Garden. I know them best."

Shen Jue refused. "A few days ago, I received word that the Garden has issued a bounty across the underworld; they're hunting anyone named 'Xiahou Lian.' Over a dozen people have already died in the last three months, and every surviving 'Xiahou Lian' has changed their name. If it weren't for my protection, you'd be a target too. Your low rank helps prevent you from being noticed—putting you in charge would be feeding you to the tigers."

"Then I'll just change my name. Easy." Xiahou Lian grinned. "I'll take your surname and go by 'Xie Lian' or 'Shen Lian.' Your pick."

Shen Jue eyed him sidelong. "You'd really change it?"

"It's just a name. What's the big deal if it makes things easier?" Xiahou Lian shrugged. "Whatever works."

Shen Jue considered that. "Very well. Most of those in the Chen Unit who knew your identity died at Guangling Temple, so the Garden likely won't uncover anything, but better safe than sorry. A new name will help keep you off their radar. 'Xie Lian' sounds awkward, so 'Shen Lian' it is. You'll assume Situ's position starting tomorrow."

"Agreed."

Exhaustion weighed on Shen Jue. Hours of sitting had stiffened his limbs, and his shoulders ached. He rolled onto his stomach. "Give me a massage," he said, the pillows muffling his voice.

His thick robes made it difficult to reach the muscles beneath, but fortunately, the room was warm thanks to its heated floors and brazier. Xiahou Lian loosened Shen Jue's collar, helping him out of his outer robe. Then Shen Jue lay face down in just his undershirt and let Xiahou Lian knead his shoulders.

Xiahou Lian had never before touched Shen Jue in so little clothing. Shen Jue trained in martial arts, but his constitution was weak, and he was prone to illness. Still, Xiahou Lian felt lean muscle beneath Shen Jue's garment—neither coarse nor bulging but refined as polished jade, elegant and strong. The thin fabric separating Xiahou Lian's fingertips from Shen Jue's skin was both pleasure and torment. A fire ignited in his chest, and his face burned. Thankfully, Shen Jue's eyes were closed.

Shen Jue's breathing soon evened out as he drifted off to sleep. Xiahou Lian stopped, lying beside him to study his face—brows, lashes, nose, and down to his soft lips. Was it the palace's nurturing environment that had crafted such jade-like beauty? Probably not—Shen Jue had been just as striking when they first met. Xiahou Lian brushed a fingertip along Shen Jue's nose. "Ah, Shaoye," he whispered. "How are you so damn easy to adore?"

Noon light struggled through the dense trees outside, leaving the room dim. Xiahou Lian turned onto his back and stared at the ceiling beams, his thoughts churning. With the Qianji Thread in their hands, the already-formidable Garden assassins were now like winged tigers.

He recalled Lady Situ's frail silhouette in the snow, then Situ Jin reaching for the moonlight as they sat in the dungeon—such good people now separated by death. Xiahou Lian too had once been an assassin, ending countless lives just like theirs. The world was cruel—those who most deserved death lived on while the good perished. Situ Jin would just be the beginning. Shen Jue was the one who had ordered the Eastern Depot to hunt Qiye Garden—he had to be the Garden's true target.

Turning his head, Xiahou Lian studied Shen Jue's sleeping face once more. They were so close—the slightest movement and his lips would meet Shen Jue's.

Xiahou Lian would protect him. He resolved to reopen the forge and reconstruct Zhaoye using meteoric iron. Only a peerless weapon could oppose a peerless threat.

Let Heaven's retribution fall on me alone. My Shaoye—my Shen Jue—my Xie Jinglan. He must stay safe.

A scream shattered the silence. "Fire!"

Shen Jue’s eyes flew open to meet Xiahou Lian’s, just inches away.

Chapter 92:
A Startling Shadow

A DARK FIGURE FLASHED past the latticed window. Xiahou Lian was startled; without a word, he vaulted over Shen Jue, stepped on the bed railing, and crashed through the window onto the veranda.

The shadowy figure was just ahead, and Xiahou Lian immediately gave chase. Eastern Depot agents shouted from behind him, following from some distance.

Gritting his teeth, Xiahou Lian pursued the shadow through the winding walkways.

The assassin seemed unfamiliar with the terrain, and Xiahou Lian took several shortcuts, gradually closing the gap. Then a sharp whistle pierced the air, as if intended to split Xiahou Lian's skull. He nimbly dodged to the side, and a crossbow bolt grazed the tip of his nose before striking down an agent behind him. Ruthlessness flashed in Xiahou Lian's eyes as he continued his relentless pursuit. The two figures running—one in front, one behind—moved so fast that only their blurred shadows were visible.

The assassin turned a corner, and Xiahou Lian followed on his heels. After three more twists and turns, the walkway ended at a decorative gate. The assassin leaped over the threshold and turned left. Without hesitation, Xiahou Lian vaulted over the railing, kicked off the wall, grabbed the top with both hands, and propelled himself over the wall like a swallow in flight. Making a steady landing on the ground, he turned and came face to face with the assassin.

The assassin wore a pleated garment to disguise himself as an Eastern Depot agent. Xiahou Lian lunged forward, but when his hand reached for his waist, he realized he'd left his blade with Shen Jue. There was no time to dwell on that—the assassin pulled a crossbow from his back and fired three bolts in quick succession. Xiahou Lian dodged, leaping into the air, and all three bolts embedded themselves at an angle in the gray wall behind

him. As he landed, Xiahou Lian yanked one of the iron bolts free; its cold weight chilled his palm.

“Fight or surrender?” Xiahou Lian asked, slowly tightening his grip on the bolt.

The assassin sneered arrogantly. “You’ve got nothing but a damn crossbow bolt. You think you can stab me to death with that?”

They moved at the same instant! The assassin unsheathed his long blade and charged, launching a whirlwind of slashes—yet Xiahou Lian blocked every strike, the assassin’s blade clashing against the iron bolt with sharp metallic clangs. Locked in a contest of strength, the opponents stood face to face, sparks flying each time their weapons met, the screeching sounds grating on the ears.

The sound of approaching agents reached them. *This bastard is stalling for time!* the assassin suddenly realized. Cursing, he disengaged, his right hand still gripping his blade while his left drew his crossbow and fired. Xiahou Lian ducked under the bolt, then thrust the iron bolt he held toward the assassin’s left hand. The assassin reacted swiftly, twisting his wrist to block with the crossbow. Once again, the two stood locked in place; they could hear each other’s pounding heartbeats.

“Brother, we’re all just trying to survive in this world—how about letting me go?” the assassin pleaded.

Xiahou Lian scoffed coldly, about to refuse, when his gaze dropped to the crossbow in the assassin’s hand. The black iron frame gleamed ominously, and beneath its sight was an intricate etching of interlocking vines. Below that were two characters in tiny seal script: *Jinghong*.

“Shiqi?!” Xiahou Lian exclaimed in surprise.

Tang Shiqi froze. “That’s your daddy’s name you’re saying there! How did you know me?!”

Xiahou Lian glared at him for running his mouth even at a time like this. “It’s me! Xiahou!”

Tang Shiqi gaped at him.

The shouts of the agents quickly grew even louder. Flinching, Tang Shiqi grabbed Xiahou Lian’s sleeve and pulled him into a narrow

passageway. Pressed against the corner wall, they listened until the agents' chaotic footsteps had rushed past.

"Damn it! I thought the Garden had caught you!" Xiahou Lian tore off Tang Shiqi's mask, revealing his round face. "What the hell are you doing setting fires in the Eastern Depot?"

"The Garden did catch me—that's why I'm here setting fires! The bastards force-fed me Paradise Fruit to make me work for them unpaid!" Noticing Xiahou Lian's uniform, Tang Shiqi enviously touched the embroidered patterns on his chest. "You're really alive, Boss…and you've become an official! Wasn't that damn eunuch Shen Jue your enemy? Oh, wait, I get it—the safest place is right under the foe's nose! Boss, you're brilliant!"

"Damn you, Shiqi, that was all a misunderstanding. He arrested me to save me… Never mind. It's too complicated to explain right now. Just know that he's my sworn brother." Xiahou Lian peeked outside to ensure that no one was near, then turned back to Tang Shiqi. "Come on—let's find somewhere safe to talk."

Xiahou Lian led Tang Shiqi to a grotto hidden within the rock garden. The cave was pitch-black, so dark that they couldn't see their own hands. Tang Shiqi stuck an incense stick into the ground and lit it with a flint. "We've only got the time it'll take this incense to burn. I have to leave before noon—the storeroom fire is already smoking. If I'm gone too long, my handler will get suspicious."

"How'd you get caught? I left a message in the Hangzhou safehouse telling you to lay low."

"How the hell was I supposed to lay low?" Tang Shiqi grumbled. "I'm alive—I need to eat and drink. The Eastern Depot has a bounty on me, and so does the Garden. I can't stay in the underworld, nor work an honest trade. One day, I was sleeping at an inn—I must've slipped up somehow, and that's where they caught me."

Licking his lips, he continued, "As soon as they hauled me in, they asked where you were. How the hell was I supposed to know? Anyway, you'd killed your old man, and I figured you'd have kicked the bucket by then without Seven Fifteen. So I told them you were dead. They insisted you weren't, though, and accused me of lying. They tortured me for over

half a year before they finally believed I really knew nothing. At that point, Duan Jiu gave me a choice: Take Paradise Fruit and join the Garden as an assassin or die. I chose to live. That's how I ended up here."

Xiahou Lian's expression darkened. He patted Tang Shiqi's shoulder. "I'm sorry for dragging you into this."

"Hey, no need for that. We're brothers." Tang Shiqi grinned. "I should actually thank Shen Jue. Before I got caught, he raided all those safehouses you set up and cut off all means of contacting you. If he hadn't, I really might've given you away."

Xiahou Lian frowned. "I've always wondered—how did the Garden find out that I was alive and start hunting me? How long have you been with the Garden, Shiqi? What do you know? What's the situation there now? Where are they hiding?"

The barrage of questions overwhelmed Tang Shiqi. He thought for a moment. "I'm too low-ranking to have been to their headquarters. I don't know where the Garden is. I saw their leader once in Datong, though. If you search there, you might find clues."

He picked up a twig and began drawing a crude face on the ground. "The Garden's different now. Rumor has it that, after you killed Shixin, there was no successor for the Garden's leadership. And Shen Jue hunted down the assassins, nearly wiping out all their safehouses, so Duan Jiu took the remaining assassins back to their northern stronghold to regroup. There's no longer an abbot—the new leader is 'Lord Yama.' The Garden has a rule: 'Do not approach nor gaze at the Yama—just bow.' I've never seen his real face, just his shadow from afar. He looked like a dwarf."

"A dwarf?"

"Yeah, short and stocky. Lord Yama's the one who brought the Paradise Fruit to replace Seven Fifteen. The Garden doesn't even use Seven Fifteen anymore."

"So…Lord Yama was the true mastermind all along?" Xiahou Lian muttered, deep in thought. "Was Shixin just the puppet they used to control the Garden?"

Tang Shiqi had his own questions. Cautiously, he asked, "Boss, did you get the antidote from your deadbeat dad? I guess he still saw you as his

son after all!”

“Cut the crap. Keep talking,” Xiahou Lian urged.

Tang Shiqi drew another face below the first, then added a line to connect them. “I don’t know whether Shixin was a puppet, but Duan Jiu is the one under the Yama’s control now. He relays the Yama’s orders. He’s the bastard who forced me to take the Paradise Fruit. He needs the Paradise Fruit to numb the pain from his unhealed wounds—so he’s making everyone else take it too. Damn him!”

Xiahou Lian’s expression darkened further.

“Do you still think of him as ‘Uncle Duan’? Don’t, Boss. He’s a backstabbing snake.” Tang Shiqi had noticed Xiahou Lian’s fist clench beneath his sleeve. Xiahou Lian had an intimidating aura when he was in a serious mood.

“My antidote did come from Shixin,” Xiahou Lian said in a low voice. “Before I killed him, he made me drink tea. The chief guessed that Shixin sacrificed his own life to give me and Chiyan a chance to escape the Garden. Now it seems Duan Jiu was always the Yama’s spy, only pretending to be Shixin’s friend.”

Tang Shiqi sighed. “People’s hearts are hard to read, but Boss, let me tell you—if you meet anyone from the Garden other than me, kill them without hesitation. The Paradise Fruit is too potent, and the assassins have gone mad—some have even killed each other for it, all while praising the Yama and thanking him for granting them ‘supreme bliss.’”

Xiahou Lian looked at Tang Shiqi with imperfectly concealed concern.

“Don’t worry about me.” Tang Shiqi punched Xiahou Lian’s shoulder lightly. “I’ve always admired you, Boss—you’re the manliest man I’ve ever met. I’ll never regret being your subordinate. Plus, if it weren’t for you, I’d be long dead. I’ve made a decision: I’ll be your inside man in the Garden. They don’t have safehouses anymore, and each mission is assigned by a handler. If they target someone important, I’ll tip you off. Don’t forget, I’m head chef at Zhu Tower now—braised pork trotters are my specialty. You can find me there; just be discreet.”

They bumped fists. “You’re a good brother!” said Xiahou Lian. “But remember, your life comes first. Keep your guard up.”

“There’s one more thing I need your help with,” Tang Shiqi added, wringing his hands. “I’ve got a sweetheart, a girl from the Zhao family in Hangzhou. Met her at Lingyin Temple. She’s raising my kid—must be over four now. With the Garden controlling me, I haven’t been able to see her—I don’t know how she’s been managing alone. If you get the chance, Boss, send her some silver.”

“Consider it done.”

Tang Shiqi scratched his head sheepishly. “Uh, one more thing… When I got together with her, I used your name.”

Xiahou Lian pressed his palm to his forehead, exasperated. “When the hell will you quit this fucking habit of yours, Shiqi?”

Tang Shiqi chuckled awkwardly, then glanced at the incense, now nearly burnt out. “We’re almost out of time,” he said hurriedly. “Boss, I’ve gotta go!”

Xiahou Lian stopped him. “One last question: Is Chiyan in the Garden?”

Tang Shiqi shook his head. “I haven’t seen him. Oh! That reminds me: There’s someone in the Garden you *mustn’t* go easy on—kill him on sight.”

“Who’s that?”

“The Kinnara—Shu Qing.”

Xiahou Lian froze. “My little brother?!”

Tang Shiqi saw that the incense had burned out. “No time to explain—just do as I say.”

Xiahou Lian had no choice but to give up on pressing him further. He guided Tang Shiqi to the grotto’s exit and pointed the way. “I’ll draw the agents away. Run fast.”

As they stepped into the light, Tang Shiqi got a clear look at Xiahou Lian’s face. Xiahou Lian was taller than him, and in the earlier chaos of

fighting and hiding, Tang Shiqi had overlooked the fact that Xiahou Lian's new face was identical to that of the man in Shen Jue's paintings.

Tang Shiqi was stunned. *Good grief! That damn eunuch has such filthy thoughts about my boss—and while Boss sees him as a sworn brother!* "Uh, Boss," Tang Shiqi stammered. "That Shen Jue—he's—"

"Over there!" an agent suddenly shouted.

Both men tensed as a line of agents in black uniforms rushed toward them from the garden veranda, their golden-embellished scabbards gleaming blindingly in the sunlight.

Grabbing Xiahou Lian's arm, Tang Shiqi blurted, "Shen Jue's up to no good—watch out!" Then he vaulted over the rocks and fled like the wind.

Xiahou Lian had no time to ponder his words. He hurried to intercept the agents. "Halt! Slow down!" he barked.

"What? Why?" one agent asked.

Xiahou Lian knew there must be a sheath watching Shiqi—he needed to put on a show for them. "We'll give chase, but not catch them," he declared.

"Who the hell are you to order us around?" the agent scoffed. "Don't think you can throw your weight around just because you're chummy with the chief. Remember, Xiahou Lian—you're the same rank we are."

Shen Jue's voice rang out from afar. "Not anymore."

Everyone turned to see Shen Jue approaching, his hands clasped behind his back. Haloed in sunlight, his tall, slender figure resembled a celestial being descending. The agents immediately bowed and stepped back.

Shen Jue's single sweeping glance emanated authority. "Effective immediately, Xiahou Lian will be renamed 'Shen Lian' and promoted to head of the Eastern Depot's eighteen divisions. You'll all obey his commands. Understood?"

"Yes!"

“Then give chase—but don’t catch your target.” Shen Jue waved his hand.

The men acknowledged the order and rushed off in pursuit.

Xiahou Lian turned to look at Shen Jue, and their eyes met. Shen Jue didn’t ask why he was letting the assassin escape; instead, he summoned Shen Wenxing, who approached carrying a sword. The scabbard was black to begin with, but the fire had darkened it further, making the weapon look like a charred stick—it was pretty shabby.

“Everything in the storeroom—the Paradise Fruit and the Garden’s property—burned up,” Shen Jue declared. “Only a few blades remained. This one seemed interesting, so I brought it to show you.”

Xiahou Lian took the sheath and drew the sword. Its three-foot blade was engraved with lotus patterns at the hilt, its entire length jet-black. The sunlight touched the metal, and a dark golden sheen rippled across the surface. When Xiahou Lian flipped his wrist, the blade’s edge reflected his sharp eyes. There, he saw the characters etched into the steel: *Bushenglian*.

“Another black blade,” Xiahou Lian said.

Shen Jue nodded. “It’s also forged from Western high-carbon steel,” he elaborated. “Whose sword is this? Does anyone else in the Garden use a black blade?”

Xiahou Lian shook his head. “No—this was Shixin’s. Why give it to me? Take it away. Store it or discard it—do whatever you want.” He handed the sword back to Shen Wenxing.

Telling Shen Wenxing to keep the blade, Shen Jue began walking side by side with Xiahou Lian, and finally he asked, “What happened earlier?”

Xiahou Lian told him about Tang Shiqi, omitting only Shiqi’s warning that Shen Jue was “up to no good.” He had no idea why Shiqi had said that. “Up to no good”? He, Xiahou Lian, had nothing but his worthless life—and he’d already given that to Shen Jue. What else could someone like Shen Jue possibly want from him?

His thoughts turned to Shu Qing. The kid had defected from the Garden, so how had he ended up back in their ranks? Had he been captured

as well? Shiqi's tone had suggested that Shu Qing had changed drastically. Xiahou Lian felt uneasy, but he couldn't do anything about the matter for the time being.

After hearing what Xiahou Lian said, Shen Jue pondered for a moment before instructing Shen Wenxing to relay an order: the Eastern Depot agents in Datong were to screen all dwarfs. Xiahou Lian looked up just as Shen Jue gave the command. It was obvious that Shen Jue had only just awoken; faint marks still creased his face. Xiahou Lian found it strangely adorable.

He must have been the only person in the world who'd have dared to consider the eunuch at the helm of the Directorate of Ceremonial, the chief of the Eastern Depot, *adorable*. Silently repressing his restless heart, Xiahou Lian had to admit to himself that, if anyone was "up to no good," it was probably him.

The snow blanketing the garden crunched softly underfoot. Icicles dangled from the trees, glinting in the light. They strolled side by side until they reached a covered bridge. The pond below seemed frozen solid, but its thick ice occasionally revealed the fleeting shadows of fish darting beneath, like careless strokes of ink.

"A-Lian," Shen Jue said abruptly.

"Hm?"

"You must learn to 'borrow the tiger's might.'"

Xiahou Lian didn't understand the phrase. "Huh?"

"If anyone disobeys or challenges you, invoke my name. If anyone gives you trouble, lean on my authority." Shen Jue shot him a sidelong glance, then flicked his forehead. "What's the point of me climbing so high if I can't even shield you?"

To Xiahou Lian, relying on a connection felt rather unmanly. He flushed a little. "Oh," he muttered quietly.

As they chatted about trivial matters, Shen Wenxing hurried over. "Godfather, a maid from Jingyang Palace has come to the Directorate in tears. She says that it's impossible to serve in the household of that girl—the marquis of Linbei. The marquis beat a young eunuch so badly today that

he can’t get out of bed. The maid’s begging you to transfer her anywhere else; she says even hauling sacks at the Wine and Vinegar Bureau would be better.”

Shen Jue frowned. “She should go to the supervising eunuch if she wants to be transferred. Why come to me?”

Shen Wenxing hesitated, then said, “Understood. Your son will send her away.”

As he bowed to leave, Shen Jue stopped him. “Never mind. Since she came to me, I can’t just ignore this. Have someone clean up the marquis’s residence. We’ll send the marquis herself back home—let her torment her own people. Why let her cause trouble in the palace? She only has two months left in the capital. Once the weather warms, send her back to her fief.”

Shen Wenxing smiled. “Understood. You’re merciful as always, Godfather.”

After another moment’s thought, Shen Jue added, “And look into the marquis’s background. How did she develop such a violent temper? Her entire family is dead—only she remains. Something feels off.”

Shen Wenxing bowed in assent and withdrew.

Chapter 93:
Brothers-in-Arms

SHEN JUE ISSUED AN ORDER that all canal shipments be reported to the authorities prior to clearance, and Eastern Depot agents set up checkpoints to inspect goods at docks and water stations across multiple prefectures. Any Paradise Fruit discovered was burned on the spot, and those caught consuming it were imprisoned and forced to detox. Since Paradise Fruit contained severely toxic azalea flowers, however, withdrawal caused paralysis and triggered bleeding from all orifices. Many couldn't endure the agony and killed themselves in their cells. The next day, the guards would open the cell doors to find piles of new corpses.

The bodies were carried from the prisons and dumped in mass graves. Public resentment of the policy grew, and some rioters even stormed jails, forcing local officials to release the addicts.

The issue kept Shen Jue swamped—he spent three days and nights debating with the grand secretaries without arriving at a solution. They clearly couldn't keep arresting Paradise Fruit users, but they still had to hunt down the Garden assassins. Xiahou Lian led agents through neighborhoods to check household registrations. They detained vagrants for origin verification and sent unidentified individuals to the Eastern Depot for interrogation, unearthing many of the Garden's operatives.

When people saw the fierce man who led the dark swarm of mounted agents through the streets, they scattered at once.

Even Xiahou Lian's name change proved futile: The Garden took notice of "Shen Lian," lead division head of the Eastern Depot, and added him to their kill list.

Within half a month, Xiahou Lian had survived five assassination attempts. Once he'd tried to rest at a roadside tea stall, and a blade nearly speared his skull before he even settled on the bench. The fifth attempt had involved nearly invisible wire traps—if he hadn't been vigilantly carrying a torch to illuminate hidden threats on his way home, he would've been sliced apart. He slept clutching his sword now.

Still, changing his name had offered one advantage. If the Garden didn't realize that Shen Lian was *Xiahou* Lian, they weren't likely to send the Garuda himself. Xiahou Lian strictly forbade his subordinates to report these incidents to Shen Jue. When he was injured, he changed into clean clothes before returning to the Eastern Depot.

After New Year's, the cold persisted, snow falling sporadically. Xiahou Lian sent all of his meager savings via courier to Tang Shiqi's wife and child. His old coat was holey, and its padding long gone, but he left himself too broke to buy a new one; he was also too embarrassed to ask Shen Jue, so he endured the chill. One morning, as Xiahou Lian blew on his hands and stamped his feet to keep warm on his way to roll call, his colleagues bowed and greeted him as "Young Lord Shen." He glanced back, puzzled—they typically called him just "Lord Shen," so where had the "young" come from?

Shrugging it off, he turned a corner and ran into Shen Wenxing. His eyes lit up immediately—was Shen Jue at the Eastern Depot?

"Looking for Godfather, Gege?" Shen Wenxing asked as he cheerfully approached.

"Since when do you call me 'Gege'? What's with the sweet talk?" Xiahou Lian fell into step beside him. "Is the chief in his office? I need to report."

"He's reviewing documents—and there's a backlog, so he'll likely be there all day." As they neared the office, Shen Wenxing slowed down. "And 'Gege' is proper. Our godfather adopted me years before you, but you're still my elder."

Xiahou Lian froze. "What? Adopted? *Who's* my godfather?"

Shen Wenxing blinked. "Didn't you acknowledge the chief as your godfather half a month back? Your changing your name publicized the news." With sudden understanding, he added, "Oh, there's no need for shame! You and he may be close in age, but he's the chief. He's young, but all the palace folk call him Father regardless! In fact, some visiting officials *decades* older than him eagerly call him 'Father' to his face!"

Finally comprehending, Xiahou Lian nearly choked. The world now thought that Shen Jue had adopted him?

Shen Jue's voice cut in from behind them. "What are you talking about?"

Returning from the latrine, he'd passed through the corridor and overheard Shen Wenxing babbling "godfather" over and over. When Shen Jue glanced toward Shen Wenxing, he spotted Xiahou Lian standing there as well, looking completely bewildered. It was a freezing day, yet Xiahou Lian seemed to be wearing little. The undergarment beneath his pleated robes looked so thin that Shen Jue furrowed his brow. "Why are you dressed so lightly?" he asked, grasping Xiahou Lian's hand. It was icy, even colder than his own—Xiahou Lian, who was usually as warm as a furnace, wouldn't feel so chilly unless he was freezing.

"Thick clothes just get in my way," Xiahou Lian said stubbornly. "I'm not cold anyway."

Shen Jue frowned at him. "Not cold? Your hand is like ice."

"Only because it's exposed. The rest of me is fine."

Shen Jue gave him a sidelong glance, tucked Xiahou Lian's hand into his own robes to warm it, and pulled him into the office, which was cozy and well-heated. Pressing a hand warmer into Xiahou Lian's grip, Shen Jue sat down. "What were you two talking about?"

As Shen Wenxing explained, Shen Jue's mood soured as well. *Has my husband become my godson?*

In the long silence that followed, Shen Wenxing fidgeted with his horsetail whisk, unsure of his godfather's thoughts. "Grand Secretary Dai donated some silver to the Ministry of Revenue earlier. He sold his ancestral lands in Luling."

Shen Jue sighed. "Why must he deprive himself? That pittance won't be enough for anything anyway." Then he instructed Shen Wenxing, "Sell my suburban estate and donate the proceeds to the treasury."

"I'll donate too," offered Xiahou Lian.

Shen Jue eyed him. "Donate what? Your underpants?" Pinching Xiahou Lian's thin sleeve, he chided, "Where'd all your silver go? Drinking, gambling, whoring? You can't even afford a proper coat! I told

you to go see my personal tailor in the residence, but you refused, and now you're freezing like a quail."

Xiahou Lian yanked his sleeve back. "When would I even get the time for that stuff? At most, I drink some wine. And I've got plenty of prized blades that would all be worth good silver."

"Keep them." Dismissing Shen Wenxing, Shen Jue fetched a padded coat from his cabinet and handed it to Xiahou Lian. It was Shen Jue's spare, made of camphor-scented brocade with subtle Western floral patterns. Xiahou Lian held it in both hands and breathed in Shen Jue's fragrance.

"Wear that," Shen Jue ordered, sitting back down in his armchair. "Or, if you find it too embarrassing, I have some other clothes at my place you can have; I commission new clothing frequently, and it's a shame to let perfectly good older garments sit unused. But you're the lead division head now, so your monthly stipend should have increased considerably. If you need it, you can get an advance from my bookkeeper, and I'll deduct it from your wages next month. How does that sound?"

Xiahou Lian couldn't keep enduring the cold forever. "Fine," he agreed.

"We can't have rumors going around saying that I mistreat my godson," Shen Jue added, his smirk unbearably smug.

Is this guy going to get hooked on playing father…? Ignoring Shen Jue's last commend, Xiahou Lian undid his sash while reporting, "Based on the past fortnight's investigations, we're sure that the Garden has no more hidden nests. Their operatives have dispersed into ordinary businesses, working as clerks, accountants, and the like. Some are street vendors or laborers renting houses in the city. We've checked out about half the neighborhood shops, as well as the servants of minor households, but…"

"But what?"

"But the capital is full of more influential figures. Any random person could turn out to be a marquis or earl—people we can't afford to offend. I suspect that some operatives have infiltrated wealthy households by posing as servants, but that's much harder to investigate."

"What's so hard about it?" Shen Jue sneered. "The Eastern Depot has raided even the chief grand secretary's residence! Who dares stand in our

way? Tomorrow, I'll issue an edict in the emperor's name ordering all noble households to prepare their household registries and servants' contracts for inspection. Just report anyone who disobeys to me, and I'll make them regret it." He paused, then shook his head. "This method is still too slow, though; it's like seeking a needle in a haystack. You've captured some live operatives, haven't you? Have you learned anything from the interrogations?"

Xiahou Lian removed his pleated bottoms and began to untie his double-layered jacket. "Not much. Most of those we've caught were bottom-tier operatives—they've heard of Lord Yama but don't even know whether it's a man or woman. I've asked about the Eight Legions as well, but they're clueless. The Garden now operates on one-way contacts, and they're buried deep. So those we've captured only know the Garuda is in the capital, not where."

"They're hiding well, then. Chances are they're living a double life, and that's why they're so hard to find." Shen Jue's fingers tapped the desk. "If we can't find Lord Yama, we'll go after Duan Jiu. Describe his appearance to me later—I'll sketch a portrait."

Xiahou Lian removed his jacket, revealing a heavily starched undershirt. Shen Jue leaned back in his chair, chin propped on his hand, and watched him. Years of combat had carved Xiahou Lian's body into a sculpture of muscle—even the stiff cotton couldn't hide his defined lines. As Xiahou Lian was about to change into the new jacket, Shen Jue tugged at his undershirt, exposing one firm shoulder.

"Change your undershirt too. It's so stiff—how can that be comfortable?"

Xiahou Lian paused. "No need."

Shen Jue pulled sharply, and the undershirt tore, leaving a gaping rip. "Oh no, it's torn. I suppose you'll have to wear something of mine now."

Resigned, Xiahou Lian relented, although Shen Jue seemed disturbingly set on dressing Xiahou Lian in his own clothes. He produced a silk underrobe—smooth, feather-light, and again scented with his signature fragrance. Xiahou Lian stripped off his undershirt, exposing his bare torso.

Shen Jue's gaze darkened, and then he frowned, brushing his fingers over a fresh scar on Xiahou Lian's arm. "Where did this come from?"

"Oh, I just scraped it on a door hook."

"Liar. That's clearly a blade wound." Shen Jue narrowed his eyes. "Tell me the truth or I'll interrogate your subordinates. We'll start with fifty lashes and see whether they dare hide things from me again."

Knowing Shen Jue would absolutely follow through on his threat, Xiahou Lian sighed and confessed.

Shen Jue's expression turned enraged. "You've grown bold, Xiahou Lian! I permitted you authority, not *audacity*. How dare you conceal something like this?! Were no agents around? Did you have to fight this assassin yourself?"

"Habit, I guess." Xiahou Lian glanced at his scars. "Look at all these old marks—what's one more?"

Shen Jue's gaze traveled down Xiahou Lian's body. Not an inch of skin was unmarred—new scars were layered over old ones in a crisscrossing map of violence.

"It's just an injury," Xiahou Lian tried to reassure him. "Every man's got to get hurt a couple times."

Shen Jue's hand traced the scars: the one on the left shoulder that Shen Jue had stitched himself, the ones on his torso from Xiahou Lian's assassin days, the faded but permanent whip marks on his back. His heart ached. "Xiahou Lian, do you really think getting injured is trivial?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why?" Xiahou Lian was genuinely puzzled. How could a man call himself a man if he didn't have any scars?

"Then let me make this clear: Getting injured is serious—deadly serious. Wounds leave scars, and some never heal. Some could kill you." Shen Jue helped him into the robe and tied its belt, his hands unsteady. "On top of that, it hurts me too."

Xiahou Lian froze. He suddenly understood why he'd never worried much about injuries—assassins walked alone, lived and died alone. Few had ever cared if he bled. Even his mother had just said, "Tough it out; it'll pass." In his life, many had feared, hated, or resented him—but no one had ever been hurt for him. Only Shen Jue. A slow smile spread across Xiahou Lian's face. "Yeah. I get it now."

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MEANWHILE, IN ANOTHER CORNER of the capital, Baili Yuan sat under the eaves, watching melted snowflakes stain her crimson skirt dark red.

From behind her, Duan Jiu's gravelly voice spoke. "My lord, the shipment of Paradise Fruit meant for Tongzhou Station was intercepted by the leader of the Qingzhou Guild. How should we handle it?"

"Kill him," Baili Yuan said indifferently, not turning around.

"The three assassins who defected last month have been brought back to the north. Their punishment?"

"Kill them," she replied, absently fiddling with the tassels at her waist.

"The Eastern Depot's lead division head, Shen Lian, has started rigorously screening vagrants in the capital, and we've lost a number of operatives. Will my lord order a countermeasure?"

"Send someone to kill him," she said again, swinging her legs.

Duan Jiu bowed. "Understood."

As he turned to leave, Baili Yuan suddenly spoke again. "Wait."

Duan Jiu halted, inclining his head.

"That Shen Lian fellow isn't the one I want dead." She turned her face toward him; her smile, visible through the swirling snow, was devoid of all warmth. "It's Shen Jue."

Chapter 94:
Hidden Assassins

IT WAS THE DAY of the Lantern Festival. The streets had been bustling since dusk with vendors—sugar-figure makers, street performers, fire-breathers, craftsmen selling velvet flowers and masks. Their stalls would remain open until midnight. The ornate lanterns lining the streets swung merrily in the wind, their shades inscribed with poetry and painted with flowers and birds. The sight was dazzling.

Tang Shiqi bought a lantern and wandered to a shabby noodle stall. He ordered a bowl of sweet rice dumplings to savor slowly. Most of the revelers were off floating lanterns, leaving the stall nearly empty. Not long after, someone sat down behind him, their back turned, and ordered a bowl of plain glutinous rice balls. Seeing that no one was watching, Tang Shiqi discreetly slid a paper ball down his sleeve and into his palm, then passed it behind him. Leaning back slightly, he whispered, “The Garden is moving against Shen Jue. The time and location are written here, but they might change. If they do, I’ll find a way to notify you.”

A stilt-walker in the street had drawn a crowd of onlookers three people deep, and their cheers drowned out Tang Shiqi’s voice so that only the person behind him could hear.

“How many blades?” Xiahou Lian asked, his voice low.

“Three: Garuda, Kinnara, and Gandharva. The current Garuda is supposedly adept at drawing quickly—be careful.”

After a brief pause, Xiahou Lian spoke again. “The last time we met, you mentioned Shu Qing. What happened to him?”

Tang Shiqi scratched his head. “I don’t know the details. He defected, got recaptured, and came back completely changed. Since the Garden set out to catch you, he’s been the most eager—he sharpens his blade every day now.”

“Why?”

“Because…” Tang Shiqi hesitated. “He says that, when you killed Shixin in vengeance, you doomed the Garden, leaving all the assassins to die for you…so he hates you.” He sighed. “I can’t blame you, though. He defected—who knew they’d catch him? If he’d stayed, you wouldn’t have killed Shixin.”

Xiahou Lian fell silent for a long time. As Tang Shiqi turned to look at him, he finally spoke. “No. You’re wrong. I’d have killed Shixin anyway. That was always my goal—to destroy the Garden.”

Tang Shiqi didn’t know how to respond. He ate a few dumplings, watching the lantern glow flicker as crowds passed. He swallowed and dabbed his mouth with a handkerchief—then began pretending to chew again. “One more thing—about Shen Jue…” But their surroundings were too loud, the noise drowning out his words.

Then he heard Xiahou Lian ask someone, “Want more to eat? There’s rice cakes and steamed buns as well as dumplings. I wasn’t sure what you’d like.”

Tang Shiqi turned slightly and saw that someone now sat across from Xiahou Lian. They wore a veiled hat, its black gauze obscuring their face. As they raised the spoon beneath the veil, a breeze lifted the fabric, revealing a pale chin. Tang Shiqi started—it was Shen Jue.

“There’s too much. I can’t finish,” Shen Jue said, dropping the spoon into the bowl.

“Eat what you can, and I’ll handle the rest.” Xiahou Lian lowered his voice and turned back to Tang Shiqi. “What were you saying?”

Tang Shiqi forced a laugh. “Nothing important! Just…listen to the chief. If he wants you to head west, don’t go east! If he says ‘bed’—er, ‘heaven’—don’t choose earth.”

Xiahou Lian frowned. “What the hell are you even talking about? Be serious.” He paused, then added, “During our raids for Paradise Fruit, I managed to hide a crate of it. There’s enough in that crate for two lifetimes.”

Tang Shiqi was horrified. “Boss! Don’t touch that stuff!”

“It’s not for me—it’s for you and Shu Qing… Well, never mind. It’s for you first. We’ll figure things out with him later.” Xiahou Lian exhaled. “After the Garden tries to assassinate the chief, come join the Eastern Depot. We’ll protect you from the Garden.”

Tang Shiqi was so moved that he teared up. “Boss, in my next life, I’ll reincarnate as a woman and marry you to repay you!”

Xiahou Lian grimaced. “Oh, piss off.”

Wiping his tears, Tang Shiqi finished his Lantern Festival dinner, then left a copper coin and slipped away. Glancing back, he saw Shen Jue sitting with his head on his hand, waiting lethargically for Xiahou Lian to finish his food. The man seemed a far cry from the ruthless Eastern Depot chief of rumor. With a shudder, Tang Shiqi turned and fled. *Whatever.* The boss looked happy enough. Plus, Shen Jue was a eunuch—and one with a face like a celestial maiden to boot. It was impossible to say who was taking advantage of whom there—maybe Tang Shiqi’s boss didn’t have such a raw deal after all!

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CHIYAN GAZED AT THE DESK LAMP, its flame encased in a glass shade. A few surviving winter insects fluttered near it, bumping stubbornly against the glass with soft taps—no matter how futile it was, they refused to give up.

Duan Jiu droned on, but Chiyan didn’t hear a word. Outside the window were flurries of snow; the flakes were like pale moths darting around aimlessly. Chiyan still had so much to do: Carry out the orders Shixin left him, fulfill Xiao-Lian’s wishes, achieve his own goals—but time was running out.

Today was the Lantern Festival, and fireworks were going off outside. Yunxian Tower was especially lively—men preferred listening to songs and seeking amusement among the courtesans rather than facing their “sallow old wives” back home. The sweet, smooth laughter of women filled

the air like honey dripping on silk. Chiyan listened absently to the sounds outside, his thoughts drifting like a mayfly floating toward distant clouds.

"Chiyan," Duan Jiu said sharply.

He looked up blankly. "Mm."

"You'll lead this assassination. The Kinnara and Gandharva will assist you." Duan Jiu pointed to the dossier in front of Chiyan. "Open it, Chiyan. It'll tell you what your prey is like."

Chiyan lowered his head. His eyes fell on the dossier, its cover marked with two characters in vermilion ink: *Shen Jue*.

The Gandharva ground his teeth. "I should be leading this," he said viciously. "Chiyan can't be trusted."

"An assassin without a blade is like a tiger without fangs. If you can't even control a toothless tiger, how can you expect to command bloodthirsty jackals like yourself?" Duan Jiu spoke deliberately. "Besides, Gandharva, *you* aren't the Garden's strongest assassin. You still haven't mastered Qianji Thread, while Chiyan can already control three threads at once."

The Gandharva stiffened like a dog whose tail had been stepped on. "What's so great about Qianji Thread? Blades are the one true weapon! How can you trust that brat Xiahou Lian's tricks?"

Duan Jiu chuckled and shook his head. "One or two Qianji Threads may be nothing, but what about a whole net?"

"A *net*?" the Gandharva repeated in a low voice.

"Exactly that." The candlelight flickered on the table before Duan Jiu. It cast his face in shifting shadows. "None of you saw the killing array Xiahou Lian laid for Shixin, but I did. It was an enormous net woven from fifty-six Qianji Threads. Any one of you who'd stepped into it would've been a fly trapped in a spiderweb—even Chiyan. You'd have been sliced into multiple pieces, each as small as a fist. Even if your family and friends found you, they'd never have been able to reassemble you."

"Is that how Shixin died?" The Kinnara stepped out of the shadows, revealing his pale face. A scar ran along his cheek, half-hidden by his bangs. He was a man now—no one would mistake him for the cowardly scholar he had once been.

The Kinnara turned to Chiyan, who remained expressionless, his face wooden.

“Yes. It was a vicious revenge.” Duan Jiu sighed. “But while the technique is powerful, it’s far too difficult to pull off. The threads must be woven into a completely interconnected net—tug one, and the whole thing shifts, the array ever-changing and unpredictable. To master it, you must first study the *Nine Chapters* to understand its numerical derivations and myriad mysteries—only then can you weave such a complex killing net. But none of you have read even the *Arithmetic Classic*—there’s no way I could ask *you* to make such a net.”

The Gandharva snorted. “No matter. I can kill him with a simple blade.”

Duan Jiu chuckled softly, his sparse mustache twitching in what looked almost like mockery. “Don’t underestimate Shen Jue, child. His name has lingered on the Garden’s kill list for eight years now, and no assassin has brought back his head yet. And in those eight years since he rose to lead the Eastern Depot, his hounds have hunted our spies and assassins all across Great Qi. He’s infiltrated the Garden relentlessly. Four years ago, he uprooted most of our hidden nests—we nearly perished. If not for the Paradise Fruit that turned his own agents to our side, we would already have been exterminated.”

“I’ll go alone,” Chiyan said.

Duan Jiu frowned. “I just finished saying—”

“Do you think we’ll hold you back, Chiyan? Are you looking down on us?” The Gandharva narrowed his eyes.

Chiyan covered his ears and didn’t answer.

The Gandharva flew into a rage. “You—! What do you mean by that?!” He raised his fists, ready to charge forward, but the Kinnara stepped between them.

“Have you lost your mind?” the Kinnara hissed. “You dare act so insolent in front of Duan-xiansheng?!”

Duan Jiu shook his head with disgust. “How will you kill Shen Jue if you’re at each other’s throats? I’ll give you three days. Show me proper

brotherhood, or next year's Paradise Fruit will never reach your hands. Study the dossier well, children. You must know your enemy to win every battle with them."

The Kinnara and Gandharva bowed as Duan Jiu left the room. Before stepping out, Duan Jiu glanced back at Chiyan. The boy still gazed at the falling snow outside, his eyes empty, as if nothing he saw in that room concerned him beyond those drifting white flakes. The Kinnara and Gandharva departed as well, leaving Chiyan alone.

This chamber was actually a waterside pavilion above Yunxian Tower's frozen pond. Out on the ice, the madam had set up stalls and a banquet; there, men and women chased one another, laughing. The women seemed impervious to the cold, their robes slipping off to reveal pale shoulders gleaming beneath the winter moonlight. Chiyan didn't understand why they were so happy. The pavilion's guests acted like drinking wine and embracing women were the greatest joys in the world, but he thought that wine tasted foul and that women were ugly. He wished Xiao-Lian was there—he would have explained everything.

A head suddenly popped up below the windowsill. "Chiyan-gege!"

Chiyan's pupils shrank; he was startled.

Baili Yuan grinned, propping her chin in her hands. She was dressed beautifully today. A hairpin with a gold cicada ornamented by pieces of jade was tucked into her raven-black hair, and gourd-shaped jade earrings inlaid with gold dangled from her ears. Her snow-white face made her look like a finely crafted porcelain doll but for her too-dark eyes that produced a frigid, chilling air when she looked at others.

"Gege, it's been fourteen days, five hours, and forty-five minutes since we last met! Did you miss me?"

Chiyan shook his head. "No."

"Wrong answer! You're supposed to say 'Yes, I missed you.'" Baili Yuan lobbed a snowball at him. "How have you been these past two weeks?"

"Fine."

“Wrong again!” Baili Yuan packed a bigger snowball and smashed it onto his table. “Chiyan, you’re *supposed* to say ‘Not. Good,’” she told him, stressing the words.

The snowball crumbled onto the dossier. The brazier had made the room warm enough that the snow melted, soaking the ink on the pages. He hadn’t even had time to read it yet, Chiyan reflected.

“Hmph! You’re a bad guy, Gege. I’m ignoring you!” Baili Yuan stuck out her tongue and turned to leave, but then Chiyan called her name. Delighted, she spun to see him standing at the window, fixing her with his blank stare. She waved at him. “Come on, Gege—come out and play!”

“Baili, you’re bleeding,” Chiyan said.

“Huh?” she froze.

“Your leg.”

Baili Yuan looked down. Blood seeped from her trouser leg, dotting the snow crimson. It still seemed to be flowing. Only then did she notice the pain in her abdomen—something twisted inside her, throbbing in waves. Dazed, she walked back under the window, the two of them—one tall, and one small—staring at each other across the sash.

“Am I dying, Chiyan?” she asked, her voice faint, as if it could have scattered on the wind. For the first time, she looked lost—almost like a normal child.

Chiyan shook his head. “I don’t know.”

She stood still for a moment, then smiled brightly. “Gege, are you happy? Shixin sent you to kill me, and now I’m dying. Your hopes will be realized!”

Chapter 95:
Dream of a Xun's Song

XIAHOU LIAN AND SHEN JUE wandered the night market, a pale-red lotus lantern illuminating the small patch of ground underfoot. After walking about aimlessly, they somehow ended up on a narrow pebble path flanked by earthen walls; bamboo baskets and poles were piled along it.

Shen Jue still was still veiled, which made it hard to see the path clearly. He wanted to take the veil off, but he was afraid of being recognized—if the chief of the Eastern Depot were spotted strolling the night market, a crowd would gather in no time. He stepped carefully, but halfway down the path, he stumbled over a basket and nearly fell until Xiahou Lian touched his arm to steady him.

"Let me lead you," Xiahou Lian said, sliding his hand down to grip Shen Jue's wrist. They continued forward, walking in silence through the darkness.

Xiahou Lian had been quiet ever since the meeting with Tang Shiqi. He forced the occasional smile as he explained some roadside trinket, but Shen Jue could see the distraction in his eyes. After all, he was dealing with people from his past—how could bonds like those have been severed with ease? Shen Jue sighed inwardly. He hadn't thought this through. Xiahou Lian had grown up in the Garden. Who knew how many old comrades he still had? This matter should never have involved him.

Shen Jue pulled his hand back slightly, letting Xiahou Lian's fingers slip into his palm. Xiahou Lian stiffened for a moment, but he didn't pull away, letting Shen Jue hold his hand. Xiahou Lian's palm was rough from years of wielding a blade; it felt like the sandpaper used to sharpen steel. As they walked deeper into the alley, the crowd thinned until only their guards remained, trailing them at a distance. The silent, narrow path only contained the two of them. Neither one let go.

Suddenly, Shen Jue interrupted the stillness. "Let's hand the Garden case to another agent."

“No!”

Xiahou Lian stopped abruptly and turned. Caught off guard, Shen Jue bumped into him, which sent Xiahou Lian stumbling back a step. Xiahou Lian’s hands flew instinctively to Shen Jue’s waist for balance. The lantern pole in his grip pressed against Shen Jue’s side, its flickering light dancing across Shen Jue’s face through the thin black veil. For a moment, the men’s eyes met.

Xiahou Lian’s heart skipped a beat. He hastily stepped back, forcing calm into his voice. “Did I hurt you?”

Out of habit, Shen Jue started to say that he hadn’t, but he chose different words at the last moment. “You did.”

“Ah! Where?” Xiahou Lian looked Shen Jue over. It was winter—they were bundled up, and they hadn’t collided that hard. How could Shen Jue have been injured?

“My leg,” Shen Jue blurted without thinking. He immediately regretted it—Xiahou Lian hadn’t even bumped his leg, so it was obviously a lie.

Xiahou Lian chuckled. “Tired from walking? Let’s rest a bit.”

Shen Jue nodded. Xiahou Lian knelt to set down the lantern, then crouched, massaging Shen Jue’s leg. Watching the top of his head, Shen Jue continued, “Handing the Garden to someone else would be better—for you *and* the Eastern Depot.”

“Afraid that I’ll hesitate and ruin everything, Shaoye?”

“I’m afraid that it’ll hurt you.”

“There are some things I have to face,” Xiahou Lian said, standing and meeting Shen Jue’s gaze. “I can’t hide. I can’t run. And I don’t want to.”

Shen Jue still disagreed. “Do you have to torture yourself?”

“Shaoye, please,” Xiahou Lian said quietly. “I want to settle this with the Garden.”

Shen Jue studied him silently, then sighed. “If your shidi will surrender, he can join the Eastern Depot. But if he refuses…”

“Then I’ll—” Xiahou Lian clenched his fists slowly under his sleeves, as if summoning all his strength to say the words. “I’ll kill him myself.”

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THE MOONLIGHT WAS white and cold, and the snow’s pale glow reflected onto Baili Yuan’s small face. She looked like a porcelain doll—smiling yet unmistakably sorrowful. Chiyan gazed down at her for a long moment, then asked her earnestly, “Do you have a wish, Baili?”

“A wish?”

“Mm. I can help you realize it.”

“And what if my wish is for you to die with me?” Baili Yuan whispered. “Would you still grant *that* wish?” Chiyan hesitated, and the girl’s fists tightened, her eyes darkening. “I knew it… It was a lie!”

“I could carry your ashes with me,” Chiyan said abruptly, pulling a worn pouch from his robes. He emptied its contents—three copper coins—onto the windowsill to show her. “In this.”

The pouch had once been deep blue, but it had faded from years of use. “Why this one?” Baili Yuan asked, her glare softening slightly.

“My younger brother sewed it for me,” Chiyan said. “He didn’t give me many things, and I lost most of them. Only this pouch is left.”

Baili Yuan stared at it. She had always known how much Chiyan missed his twin, and the last thing she wanted was for her ashes to be carried in anything that man had made. Grinding her teeth in frustration, she turned and savagely kicked a nearby tree. The pain in her abdomen flared, sending fresh blood trickling down her thighs.

After a few kicks, she stopped and whirled back to Chiyan. “Are you an idiot?!” she yelled. “That tiny pouch couldn’t possibly hold my ashes!”

Chiyan blinked at her.

Baili Yuan wanted to leave. She felt weak—she'd forgotten her scarf, and the icy wind that seeped through her collar chilled her to the bone. The pain in her belly worsened; soon she could barely stand. Around the corner, a disheveled man appeared, likely to relieve himself. Spotting Baili Yuan's delicate figure and fair face, dark thoughts struck, and his eyes lit up. He staggered drunkenly toward her. Disgust twisted Baili Yuan's face as she slipped her hand into her robes to grip the dagger at her waist.

"What do you think you're doing?! Piss off!" A-Chu cried, springing out of nowhere. She brandished a broom at the man, whacking his face furiously. Her usually alluring makeup looked fierce in her rage.

The man yelped and fled.

A-Chu tossed the broom aside. Lifting her skirts, she rushed to Baili Yuan. "Silly child! Didn't I tell you not to wander up here?"

Baili Yuan stared at her with dark, unreadable eyes. A-Chu glanced to the side to see Chiyan crouched on the windowsill, watching. He'd probably been about to jump down and stop the drunkard himself. *They're both idiots*, A-Chu thought, sighing. She reached for Baili Yuan's hand to lead her away, then froze at the sight of blood staining the snow. "Whose blood is that?!"

"Mine," Baili Yuan said flatly.

Chiyan pointed at her. "Hers."

A-Chu grabbed Baili Yuan's shoulders in a panic. "What happened? Where are you hurt?"

"My stomach hurts," the girl said. "I think I've been poisoned."

A-Chu paused. "Your stomach hurts? Is there blood on your thighs?"

Baili Yuan nodded.

"Has this happened before?"

Baili Yuan shook her head.

Understanding now, A-Chu heaved a long sigh. For the first time, she realized what it felt like to care for a child. She gazed down at Baili Yuan. The girl looked sickly—as pale, limp, and feeble as a paper doll fished out

of water. A-Chu took her hand and led her to the backyard, calling over her shoulder to Chiyan, “Go make a bowl of brown-sugar water!”

“Is brown-sugar water the antidote?” Baili Yuan asked.

A-Chu laughed so hard she could barely breathe. “Yes, of course! Not only will it cure you, it’ll make you pretty too!”

She brought Baili Yuan to her room, stoked the brazier, and retrieved a menstrual belt from her wardrobe. Baili Yuan examined the item—it was a long strip of red cloth embroidered with peonies and lined with soft cotton. There were thin white ribbons attached at both ends, though Baili Yuan didn’t know what they were for.

A-Chu showed her how to use it, explaining menstruation along the way. Baili Yuan listened blankly as A-Chu helped her tie the belt. A faint scent of rouge enveloped Baili Yuan as A-Chu’s arms encircled her. Distracted, Baili Yuan wondered where she’d smelled that before—it was the kind of powder women in brothels loved, but it seemed familiar. A-Chu passed Baili Yuan a hand warmer to soothe her belly, and as she clutched it, Baili Yuan suddenly realized she wasn’t about to die after all. An inexplicable melancholy settled over her, as if she *should* have died.

Her cotton pants were stained, so A-Chu made her sit on the carved bed and wrapped her in a quilt. The quilt was red too. Baili Yuan knew that brothels used red bedding so that, when the men went to bed with the courtesans, it felt like a mock wedding, a false celebration.

A-Chu climbed under the covers alongside Baili Yuan. She hugged her knees. “How do you not know about menstruation, child? Didn’t your mother teach you?”

“No,” Baili Yuan said, staring at the silk flowers on the quilt. “My mother never spoke to me.”

A-Chu was puzzled. “Why not?”

“When I was little, a fortune teller came to our house,” Baili Yuan said. “He said that I was a demon reborn, and that I would bring death to my parents. They were so scared, they sent me away to live in a nunnery in the mountains. The fortune teller said that only the Buddha’s aura there could contain me and keep me from causing trouble.”

“And they believed this fortune teller? When I was a kid, some blind old man told me I’d be empress one day!” A-Chu studied Baili Yuan carefully. “So…you just lived in the nunnery all that time?”

“Mm-hmm. That place was cold. It snowed every day. There was nothing there aside from one kind of red flower. Only two or three old nuns lived there, so frail they could barely walk, so I had to play by myself. Sometimes I made snowmen and gave them names, then pretended they were my friends.”

“Did you ever go home?” A-Chu asked.

“I did,” said Baili Yuan. “On holidays, Father sent someone to fetch me. The old nuns told me that I had many siblings and that I had to please them if I wanted to stay. So I once caught a snow fox to give to them. Snow foxes are hard to trap. I set up so many snares in the snow, my fingers got frostbite before I finally caught a fox. I took it home with me in a cage. At first, my family was happy, but Wu-meimei was naughty. She reached into the cage, and the fox bit her. Father and Mother said that showed that I was unlucky—the moment I returned, I’d gotten my sister hurt. They killed the fox.”

“How awful!” A-Chu was indignant, her face flushed with anger. “She stuck her hand in herself. What did that have to do with you?”

“Later, I made them sticky rice balls, but they refused to eat them. They said food made by a demon would sicken them. The rice balls were delicious, though—I ate mine and never got sick.” Baili Yuan rested her chin on her knees. “When I was nine, Er-jiejie took pity on me and invited me to play with them. They climbed onto a rock in a rock garden, but I was too scared, so I waited below. Er-jiejie knocked Jiu-didi down, and he fell to his death at my feet. Er-jiejie was afraid that Father and Mother would punish her, so she blamed me. I told them that it hadn’t been me—that it was Er-jiejie—but they didn’t believe me. I begged my other siblings to back me up, but no one would. They all saw it happen, yet none of them spoke up for me. After that, Mother and Father never let me come home again.”

Baili Yuan’s story made A-Chu’s heart ache, but the girl’s expression remained indifferent.

“Later, I understood,” she continued. “Er-jiejie was part of their family, and I wasn’t. I was a demon. Demons don’t have siblings, so no one spoke for me. My parents should really just have killed me. If they hated me so much, why keep me alive?” Baili Yuan lifted her face and actually smiled. “Don’t you agree, A-Chu-jiejie?”

“Bah! What nonsense! They were at fault, not you! Children being cruel is one thing, but what kind of parents act like that?” A-Chu pulled her into a hug. “Our A-Yuan is the best—pretty, kindhearted, and so very clever! She can catch foxes and make rice balls. A-Yuan, will you make some for me?”

Baili Yuan was smothered against A-Chu’s chest, her nose filling with the scent of rouge. She tried to squirm free, but A-Chu wouldn’t release her. Finally, she muttered, “Fine.”

A-Chu released her with a grin, touching her nose gently. “About that ‘Xiahou’—he’s not really your brother, is he?”

Baili Yuan shook her head. “I found him in the snow. His mother had abandoned him at birth, and his father treated him like a slave. He’s like me, so I made him my brother.”

A-Chu gently cupped Baili Yuan’s cheek. The girl’s porcelain face seemed so fragile, as if it could shatter at a touch. A-Chu smiled softly, her eyes warm. “I don’t have family either. When I was little, my father offended Wei De, who was head of the Directorate of Ceremonial at the time. The Eastern Depot raided our home. I don’t even remember what my parents looked like—just those terrifying Eastern Depot agents. A-Yuan, if you don’t mind, you should call me ‘sister.’”

Baili Yuan objected. “I’m a bad person, though. You won’t like me.”

A-Chu clapped her hands. “Perfect! I’m a bad person too!”

Baili Yuan blinked.

“At your age, I was always crawling through dog holes into people’s yards and climbing trees to steal their dates!” A-Chu grinned. “So what? Little troublemaker, do you dare call this big troublemaker your sister?”

Baili Yuan was silent for a long time. A-Chu began to feel awkward, suddenly regretting her thoughtless words. A-Yuan’s clothes were so fine—

she was clearly a pampered young lady. Why would she want to claim some government-registered courtesan like A-Chu as family? But A-Chu had always been impulsive, speaking without thinking. The madam had scolded her for it countless times, but she never learned. She fidgeted, scrambling for an out. “Uh, I was just joking—”

“Jiejie,” Baili Yuan interrupted her.

A-Chu froze.

“Jiejie,” Baili Yuan said again. She lay down and curled up in A-Chu’s arms. “You said I could call you sister. I agree. From now on, you’re my sister.”

This touched A-Chu’s heart. Wiping away the tears rolling down her cheeks, she nodded firmly. A moment later, she slid out of bed barefoot and stormed toward the door. “What’s taking that Xiahou so long with the sugar water?!”

She yanked the door open just as Chiyan reached it. Both jumped in surprise; then A-Chu dragged him inside. Chiyan set the bowl of brown-sugar water on the heated table and placed the table before Baili Yuan. Then A-Chu complained that the brazier wasn’t warm enough and ordered Chiyan to fetch better charcoal from the kitchen. He obeyed and returned with a basketful, which he threw into the brazier.

Sitting on the bed, Baili Yuan tested the sugar water with a silver hairpin—it wasn’t poisoned. She glanced at the two figures by the brazier in the outer room. A-Chu chattered away, her mouth never still. One moment, she was praising the madam for not forcing her to take clients lately; a moment later, she ranted about how all men were scum—except Chiyan, though he was too simple-minded. Chiyan dried his damp sleeves by the fire; he clearly wasn’t listening.

Baili Yuan drank all the sugar water, feeling its warmth spread through her belly. Bundled in A-Chu’s red quilt, she lay down, her gaze lingering on the outer room. A-Chu was removing her makeup, so now only Chiyan was visible.

Chiyan’s appearance had been altered with cosmetics, but his features remained the same. He had sharp, fierce brows and eyes, yet his dull demeanor made him seem harmless, even meek, as though anyone could

bully him. All the ferocity had faded from his features, leaving only tranquility.

She'd met Chiyan long ago, back when she was just an ordinary little girl yearning for the New Year and for home. It was in that grand estate that she'd first seen him. She had slept alone all night in a room without a brazier, listening to the maids and nannies gambling and drunkenly cursing next door. She remembered shivering under a quilt as hard and cold as iron, holding it tightly around herself in search of warmth she never felt. Eventually, she gave up and hugged her knees instead, counting sheep and praying sleep would take her away from the cold.

Half-dreaming, she heard a xun—the soft sound drifted like wind through the night sky and jolted her awake. The melody continued, and she couldn't get back to sleep. She stared up at the dark bed canopy for a long time before slipping out of bed in just a thin robe, her bare feet hitting the icy floor. She pressed her ear to the wall to ensure that the nannies weren't coming to check on her, then threw on a jacket, climbed onto a stool, and pushed the window open to crawl out.

The xun's song floated through the otherwise silent night, as cold and lonely as the northern snow. As she listened, her heart felt hollow, like an old leather sack that could hold endless wind. She followed the music, padding down the moonlit, twisting, silver-white veranda. Her feet went numb, but she didn't stop; the ethereal notes seemed to summon her to where ghosts dwelled.

She found the player in the garden. It was a youth on the cusp of manhood. The cloak he was wrapped in looked grayish—whether by design or because it was faded, she couldn't tell. He sat by the pond in the moonlight, playing the xun like a spirit who would vanish at dawn.

Baili Yuan had hidden behind a pillar, rubbing her hands together for warmth as she listened. She wondered whether this was a dream, and didn't dare move or speak lest the ghostly musician disappear. The xun's haunting melody spread like moonlight through the pale garden, enveloping her, until she too became a shadow, small and fragile as a little animal. She listened with her whole heart, and the cold notes seemed to carry her thoughts like mayflies into the vast sky. Suddenly, she was crying, tears dripping onto the back of her hand.

She had found someone like her—someone just as alone.

Chapter 96:
Moonlit Lanterns in the Wild Night

XIAHOU LIAN ESCORTED Shen Jue home. The air was biting cold, each breath chilling their nostrils. The moon hung high in the sky, washing the narrow alley in silver light. Hand in hand, the pair walked past rows of gray courtyard houses, the road ahead dissolving into darkness. The night market was far behind them now—no human voices sounded, only the occasional bark of a dog. Xiahou Lian's mood gradually lifted, yet a wistful melancholy settled in, for Shen Jue would soon be home.

They stopped at the gate of the Shen residence, where two stone lions loomed like dark sentinels. Standing at the threshold, they bid one another goodnight. Beneath the lanterns hanging from the eaves, Shen Jue removed his hat's veil to reveal the face he'd hidden all evening. Under the lanterns hanging from the eaves, his lowered brows and eyes suggested a rarely seen tenderness. Xiahou Lian gazed at him quietly. Shen Jue was always beautiful—wherever he stood, the scene transformed into a painting. Beneath his feet, even a mud puddle would bloom with lotuses. When he stood beside Xiahou Lian, his companion's heart felt impossibly full.

Worried about nighttime dangers, Shen Jue offered to instruct a few attendants to escort Xiahou Lian home.

Xiahou Lian declined. "You go in. I'll leave once I see you enter safely."

"No, I'll watch *you* go first," Shen Jue insisted.

"Oh, just go in already!" Xiahou Lian gave his shoulder a light push.

They lingered, neither budging. The nearby guards stood stiffly in the cold wind, baffled by what was going on.

"Let's chat a little longer," Shen Jue finally said.

In truth, they would meet again the next day—and in just four hours, which would pass in the blink of an eye. Four hours of sleep never felt like enough, yet Xiahou Lian couldn't bear for them to part. He wanted Shen

Jue close, within arm's reach, where his presence could steady Xiahou Lian's heart. Before he could weigh his decision, his mouth had already agreed: "All right."

So Xiahou Lian lay a silk handkerchief on the steps for Shen Jue, and they sat side by side. Shoulders touching, they gazed at the moon. Pale clouds streaked the bluish-gray sky, and the moonlight seemed to drizzle down like rain; it left the world shimmering as if they were underwater.

"Have you finished building your forge?" asked Shen Jue.

"The forge is done. I can't work the iron, though." Xiahou Lian rubbed his temples. "I only have time at night, and then my neighbors complain about the clanging. They keep kicking my door and threatening to report me to the authorities."

"Report you? *You're* an authority," Shen Jue said, arching a brow.

"But I can't abuse my power," Xiahou Lian replied.

Shen Jue sighed.

Xiahou Lian was stubborn about his pride. Shen Jue had once tried to convince the man to borrow his authority as chief of the Eastern Depot to make things easier on himself, but months had passed without a single instance in which Xiahou Lian had done so. If not by borrowing the prestige of his "godfather's" surname, how could Xiahou Lian investigate the Garden unimpeded? "Move your forge to my estate. It's spacious—the noise won't reach the neighbors."

"That will work." Xiahou Lian nudged him. "Want to see the Qianji Thread in action? Once I forge some, I'll show you. It's fun—kind of like weaving. You need warp and weft threads, though you don't space them as tightly."

"Can you weave flowers with them?" Shen Jue asked idly.

"Of course." Xiahou Lian rummaged in his sleeve and pulled a red cord from his pouch. He looped it around his fingers and began twisting and knotting, the cord gradually taking on a new shape. "In principle, this is similar to the Qianji Thread array, just simpler. If you want to learn how to weave this, I can teach you. You're clever, so you'd probably master it in a

couple of days.” The cord quickly bloomed into a tiny three-petaled orchid, which Xiahou Lian placed in Shen Jue’s palm. “For you.”

“You’re a man, and yet you can weave,” Shen Jue mused, poking the delicate petals with a fingertip.

“I didn’t have much choice, right? My mother couldn’t weave, so I had to learn. Who else would have made our clothes?” Xiahou Lian grinned. “Honestly, I know how to do all kinds of things—cook, spin, weave, make baskets, cut bamboo, even build a house. And my mother’s negligence forced it all on me!”

“Oh,” Shen Jue said. “I can’t do any of those things.”

“Why would you need to?” Xiahou Lian asked. Shen Jue expected him to go on to say that such skills were unnecessary for a wealthy man with countless servants, but Xiahou Lian simply concluded, “I can do them for you.”

The moonlight was still, the world hushed. Far in the distance, someone released a sky lantern that floated upward until it transformed into a second moon.

“Shaoye, let me weave you a sachet,” Xiahou Lian said.

“Would you be any good at it?” Shen Jue asked skeptically. “Don’t embarrass me with shoddy work. I’d have to attend court with it.”

“Please don’t underestimate me.”

Shen Jue looked down at his feet, suddenly recalling how young maidens in the capital loved weaving sachets to toss down to their sweethearts from their embroidery towers. A sachet was a token to remember her by for a lifetime. A secret hope unfurled in his heart—if Xiahou Lian gave him a sachet, perhaps it would bind them forever. A faint smile touched Shen Jue’s lips. “Fine. I want an orchid-scented one.”

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THE BURNING CANDLE'S RED WAX dripped onto the saucer and hardened into tiny petals. Baili Yuan stared blankly at the flame until the crimson wax and golden fire melded in a hazy, dreamlike glow.

Just how had she come to encounter the melody of Chiyan's xun all those years ago? Perhaps it had been fate, the ghost of her destiny steering her into the garden to find the source of that song—just like it was fate that she'd been born a demon appointed by heaven itself, destined to bring ruin to her family and be left the sole survivor of her clan.

She'd met Chiyan again many years after that first encounter. By then, she was already Lord Yama of the Baili clan, and all assassins bowed before her. When she'd first expanded trade of Paradise Fruit to Zijin Pass, she'd met with resistance—a local gang leader had tried to seize her goods and kill her men. Enraged, she'd buried him alive in the snow, leaving only his bare head exposed. She'd watched his tears and snot freeze on his face. By morning, his head was an ice sculpture that still wore that pathetic expression.

She'd sent her subordinates to handle the aftermath, then wandered the city to entertain herself. That was where she'd seen Chiyan. He was as pitiful as before, wrapped in a tattered gray sheepskin coat with Chana wrapped clumsily in rags and tied at his waist. He'd stood under the eaves of an inn, gnawing on a hard steamed bun. He looked to be in his twenties, but his expression remained childlike, unchanged from years earlier.

She'd observed him from the crowd. He watched children play in the street, their toy drums rattling as they darted past him. An oxcart laden with hides lumbered by. The northern sunlight, pale and weak as water, nonetheless cast a faint golden hue over the scene as if that alone could warm the world. The crowd had flowed between them like a river, yet Baili Yuan and Chiyan remained still—two solitary rocks in the current. The bustling street was alive with smiling faces, but that didn't touch them. They were spectators, outsiders. *How wonderful*, she'd thought. *He's still the same—still as lonely as I am.*

Having finished removing her makeup, A-Chu approached Baili Yuan, daintily lifting her skirt as she walked. Without rouge or powder, A-

Chu's face looked clean and delicate—she had soft brows like distant mountains, large bright eyes, and faintly tinted lips.

She crouched by the bed. "Feeling better?"

Baili Yuan didn't answer; instead, she reached out to touch A-Chu's cheek. "A-Chu-jiejie is prettier without makeup."

A-Chu covered her mouth, giggling as she tapped the tip of Baili Yuan's nose. "Such a sweet-talker!"

"You're even prettier than that Shen Jue," Baili Yuan added.

"As if you've seen him!" A-Chu tittered. "Careful, or the Eastern Depot agents will snatch you for their soup! They say palace eunuchs love stewing children; the tender meat keeps them youthful. Lord Shen might dine on children daily."

"A-Chu-jiejie shouldn't wear makeup anymore."

A-Chu tilted her head. "Why not? I need it for work!"

"Quit your work. There's a policy that patrons pay to be first customer, isn't there? I have money—I'll take care of you." Baili Yuan pulled out her purse and, with a clattering noise, dumped a pile of golden ingots onto the bed.

A-Chu gaped. "Heavens, I've befriended a goddess of wealth!" She shook her head vigorously, putting the ingots back into the purse and stuffing it into Baili Yuan's garments. "Hide your money. If thieves see it, they'll kill you for it! What does your family even do?"

"We sell medicine."

"Medicine pays this well?! To think, the last time a pharmacy owner came to hear me sing, I rejected him for being too fat!" A-Chu sighed dramatically. "Ah well—such is fate. Come, let's go release lanterns!"

She pulled Baili Yuan up, dressed her hastily in a clean skirt and crimson cloak, and then dragged her to the courtyard. Chiyan stood at the edge of the courtyard waiting for them. Snow dusted his shoulders and hair, and he held the corners of a sky lantern. A-Chu eagerly grabbed an ink brush and wrote her wishes on the oiled paper. Baili Yuan looked at them from one side and read aloud: "'Earn big money.' 'Find a handsome, powerful man.' 'Have him buy my freedom.' 'Become his concubine.'"

She didn’t look at Chiyan’s wish. She already knew that it would be something like “*find my brother*” or “*keep my brother safe*.” Brother, brother, brother—she hated that brother! She’d find and kill him soon. Chiyan only needed a sister. No brothers were allowed.

“Your turn!” A-Chu handed her the brush.

Baili Yuan wrote her wish in bold, sweeping strokes. A-Chu watched in awe. “Your calligraphy is gorgeous!” she raved. Indeed, Baili Yuan’s characters were the most majestic of the three, each stroke confident and unyielding.

Chiyan lit the lantern. It swelled with heat, rising from their hands into the sky. The flames crackled, spinning the lantern slowly in the wind. As the firelight illuminated Baili Yuan’s wish, Chiyan read it aloud.

“‘A-Yuan wishes to be with Chiyan-gege and A-Chu-jiejie forever.’”

Chapter 97:
Dragon and Serpent Blades

"EVERYONE IN POSITION?" Xiahou Lian asked in a low voice.

He was crouched in a dark alley, his black uniform blending in to the night. Only the goose-quill saber glinting at his waist betrayed his presence when he moved slightly. Behind him, two rows of Eastern Depot agents stood pressed against the walls—around fifty in total. They all remained motionless, like ebony statues.

"Everyone's in position," the squad leader confirmed. "Three hundred men, awaiting orders."

"Good."

The murmur of voices drifted on the evening wind, blending with the cacophony of peddlers' cries. This was West Market Street, three hundred paces north of the imperial city walls; the capital's busiest horse market lay at the foot of the street. Xiahou Lian drew his saber, resting its spine against his elbow. The polished blade reflected the shadow of Zhu Tower's archway, which had black scale tiles, gray-white pillars, and carved brick screens on either side. Despite the cold, a waiter stood beneath the archway to greet guests. He only wore a thin jacket, but his face was flushed from exertion.

The waiter was actually one of Xiahou Lian's lieutenants, and there was a short blade hidden beneath his clothes. As he ushered guests in, he glanced subtly toward Xiahou Lian and gave a slight nod.

A careful observer might have noticed that the pedestrians passing Zhu Tower's entrance had doubled back more than once. They walked to the end of West Market Street, then turned and retraced their steps. That was because every one of them—the tea-stall patrons, the pastry vendors, the street performers, even the girl selling herself to fund her father's burial—was an Eastern Depot agent in disguise. They were all taut with tension, their peripheral vision focused on Zhu Tower's doors.

Shen Jue had originally been scheduled to dine with Chief Grand Secretary Zhang Zhao at Zhu Tower that night. Two days earlier, though, Tang Shiqi had brought Xiahou Lian new intel: Garden assassins planned to strike tonight. Thus, the figures inside Zhu Tower now were decoys. They would exit at quarter after seven to board a carriage, and that was when the assassins would descend from the skies.

Xiahou Lian rubbed the cold hilt of his saber, steadying his breath. His heart pounded faster, the blood simmering in his veins. He knew he might soon face his successor—the Garuda, who would be the Garden's strongest assassin now.

"Sir, the chief ordered that you not engage personally," the squad leader whispered. "The Garden's wolves are vicious. If anything happened to you, we could not answer for it."

"No matter," Xiahou Lian said. "We have numbers on our side."

"But—" the squad leader began to protest when a sudden swell of noise from Zhu Tower cut him off.

Shen Jue and Zhang Zhao's decoys had emerged. The squad leader fell silent. Everyone held their breath, their eyes fixed on the restaurant's entrance. "Shen Jue" and "Zhang Zhao" engaged in a perfunctory exchange of pleasantries, debating who should board the carriage first. The agents surrounding them gripped their sabers, their tension palpable. Xiahou Lian frowned. They shouldn't be acting so nervous; assassins were perceptive; such obvious unease would give them away.

From afar came the rumble of wheels and the rhythmic clop of hooves. Xiahou Lian leaned out to look as a four-horse carriage rolled into view from the end of West Market Street. Its carved panels were adorned with tassels. A lantern swaying on its roof illuminated the coachman's weathered, wrinkled face, sallow as crumpled parchment.

"Whose damn carriage is that?" Xiahou Lian asked, his brow furrowed.

"It has four horses, so it must belong to a feudal prince."

"Can we stop it? Assassins are coming, and the carriage is in the way."

“No, we can’t, sir. Not if it belongs to a prince.”

The coachman cracked his whip, urging the horses closer to Zhu Tower’s gate.

Xiahou Lian cursed under his breath. “I don’t care whose carriage it is. Send someone to tell them that the chief is here—no one passes, not even gods.” He knew this would reflect poorly on Shen Jue, but there was no other choice.

The squad leader acknowledged Xiahou Lian’s order and moved to comply. Just then, the moon broke through the clouds, casting a pale glow over the street. In that fleeting light, the coachman raised his whip, and a sliver of metallic cold flashed sharp as a blade against Xiahou Lian’s eyes. The coachman had a weapon hidden in his sleeve!

Xiahou Lian’s blood ran cold. “Stop that carriage!” he roared.

Sabers rang out in unison as their bearers unsheathed them, their gleam briefly whitening the night.

The coachman cracked his whip. His four horses reared and bolted, and the carriage careened forward like a mad beast. Xiahou Lian shoved the squad leader aside, sprinted into the street, and severed the reins of Shen Jue’s decoy carriage. Mounting a horse, he gave chase, his agents close behind.

The wind howled in his face, the horses’ hooves pounding like war drums. Xiahou Lian could hear his own ragged breathing. The carriage raced ahead, its wheels spinning wildly, its cabin rattling as if it was about to disintegrate. Xiahou Lian gradually closed the distance, the snow kicked up by the wheels stinging his cheeks. Ahead lay the end of West Market Street—and the boundary of the Eastern Depot’s ambush. The carriage could not be allowed to escape.

Xiahou Lian spurred his horse alongside the vehicle. Behind him, agents fired crossbow bolts trailing thin iron chains; they shrieked through the air and embedded themselves in the carriage walls. The arrowheads unfolded into hooks upon impact, piercing the wood like a beast would sink its claws into prey.

“Pull!” Xiahou Lian commanded.

The agents yanked their reins, and the chains snapped taut. In a storm of splinters, three sides of the carriage flew apart—and a hail of arrows dense as a swarm of hornets erupted from within. Xiahou Lian ducked low, narrowly avoiding the projectiles. A few agents fell, but more surged past their fallen comrades. From a distance, it looked as if a wrecked carriage was dragging a black tide over West Market Street.

The agents caught up. More hooks shot forth, embedding themselves in the assassins' bodies and yanking them, screaming, from the carriage. The assassins skidded across the snow, leaving long streaks of blood—the bright-red color was muted in the darkness, so the trails of blood resembled bleak ink strokes on parchment.

Figures emerged atop the roofs of the buildings flanking the street—Eastern Depot archers lying in wait. Their arrows gleamed coldly under the moon, the tips glinting like ice. At their captain's order, they shot a storm of arrows shrieking through the air; their collective screech was like that of vengeful spirits, sharp enough to pierce skulls.

The remaining assassins fired their hand crossbows at the last second, striking several agents, then leaped with inhuman agility onto riderless horses. Three of the assassins, as well as the "carriage driver," severed the reins of the coach horses and mounted the fleeing steeds. The arrows only struck the carriage's undercarriage, and the wreckage leaned sideways, blocking the agents' path. Xiahou Lian urged his horse into a leap; it jumped over the debris, and he continuing his pursuit.

"Sir, they've managed to flee our ambush!"

West Market Street was behind them as the assassins retreated into the night. Xiahou Lian glanced back—thirty agents remained there, with more catching up. He made a snap decision. "Keep giving chase! Follow their path—but watch for Qianji Thread!"

The agents thundered after the assassins, bolts flying. Their targets toppled from their horses only for their would-be captors to find that the assassins had taken their own lives. The number of pursued dwindled until only three assassins remained galloping through the dark.

"Those are the real Garden assassins—the rest were undercover moles!" Xiahou Lian barked. "After them!"

The moon vanished behind clouds, plunging the streets into oppressive blackness. Shadows loomed everywhere, heavy with danger. The hoofbeats of the assassins' horses echoed like distant war drums—*thud-thud*, *thud-thud*—that pounded in time with Xiahou Lian's heart.

The assassins vanished around a corner. Spurring his horse on, Xiahou Lian caught a fleeting glimpse of their robes disappearing into an alleyway, like moth wings dissolving into the dark.

"Torches up! Blades forward—men behind!" Xiahou Lian ordered.

Torches flared to life. Xiahou Lian dismounted and took one, stepping into the narrow alley. Shadows writhed in the flickering torchlight, gilding the men's faces like those of temple statues. The assassins fled deeper, their pursuers relentless. The alley was so tight that two men could barely walk abreast. Piss buckets lined the walls, their stench thick in the air, the clatter of overturned buckets reverberating like discordant gongs. The assassins split up, and the agents divided to give chase. The alleyway branched out like a spider's web, the fleeing killers and the riders pursuing them spreading like quicksilver through the veins of the capital.

Xiahou Lian led the charge, mere steps behind the nearest assassin. He was almost close enough to brush the assassin's robes with his torch, yet each time he tried, the man slipped just out of reach. Xiahou Lian reached for a bolt, only to find his quiver empty. Gritting his teeth, he pushed onward faster. The assassin flickered in and out of sight around corners, clear and vivid one moment, a ghostly silhouette the next.

Something's wrong! The realization struck like lightning, and Xiahou Lian skidded to a halt. Something *was* very wrong—alleys were ideal places to deploy Qianji Thread, so why hadn't he encountered any? And where were the Garden's sheaths? The assassins had been fleeing for a while now, so where were their reinforcements?

These assassins weren't here to kill them—they were leading them somewhere. Xiahou Lian turned back at once to see the alley behind him empty; in his haste, he'd outpaced his men. The torchlight barely pierced the gloom, and darkness pressed on his shoulders like physical weight. Each step deeper into it felt like advancing into enemy territory. Xiahou Lian's breaths were short, as if an iron band constricted his throat. It was surreal—he'd once been the hunter lurking in shadows. Now he was the prey.

Then a hiss like a striking serpent came from behind! Xiahou Lian instinctively raised his torch, and a bolt punched through the flame. The impact wrenched the torch from his grip. It landed in the snow, flame sputtering once before dying with a hiss. Darkness, thick and suffocating, swallowed the world whole. The alley was silent save for his own breaths and heartbeat. Xiahou Lian advanced a few steps, his saber drawn.

Darkness. Silence. His boots crunched softly in the snow. Danger loomed on all sides. He could feel the assassin's frigid gaze from the dark; it was like cold needles pricking his spine. Who was his opponent? The Garuda or the Kinnara?

His pulse raced. Someone lurked in the night, poised to strike. Calm—he had to stay calm. He inhaled deeply and stopped moving. Gripping his saber with both hands, he sank into a low stance and closed his eyes, drowning his field of vision in blackness. The night breeze brushed his hair, cool against his cheeks. Like a statue carved from stone, he held his stance.

Long ago, when he'd trained in myriad blade styles, he'd learned a technique called the Blind Saber. Students learning the Blind Saber were blindfolded in the forest in the summer, surrounded by screaming cicadas. Their instructors would loose darts without warning from any direction; the trainees had to discern the darts' whisper beneath the cacophony and cut them from the air. Hearing was sometimes more reliable than sight—and when an opponent's blade lay beyond one's field of vision, sound alone would betray its approach. There were no cicadas now—only silence—but the wind would tell him where the enemy lurked.

Far off, the agents' muffled footsteps echoed. Bamboo poles clattered against walls. A rat scurried from a drain, squeaking as it vanished into a crate. From the main street came the night watchman's clappers—*clack*—*clack*—*clack*—three strikes, then three more. The wind murmured in his ears. All of creation fell silent while coiled thunder hummed beneath the surface, ready to crack.

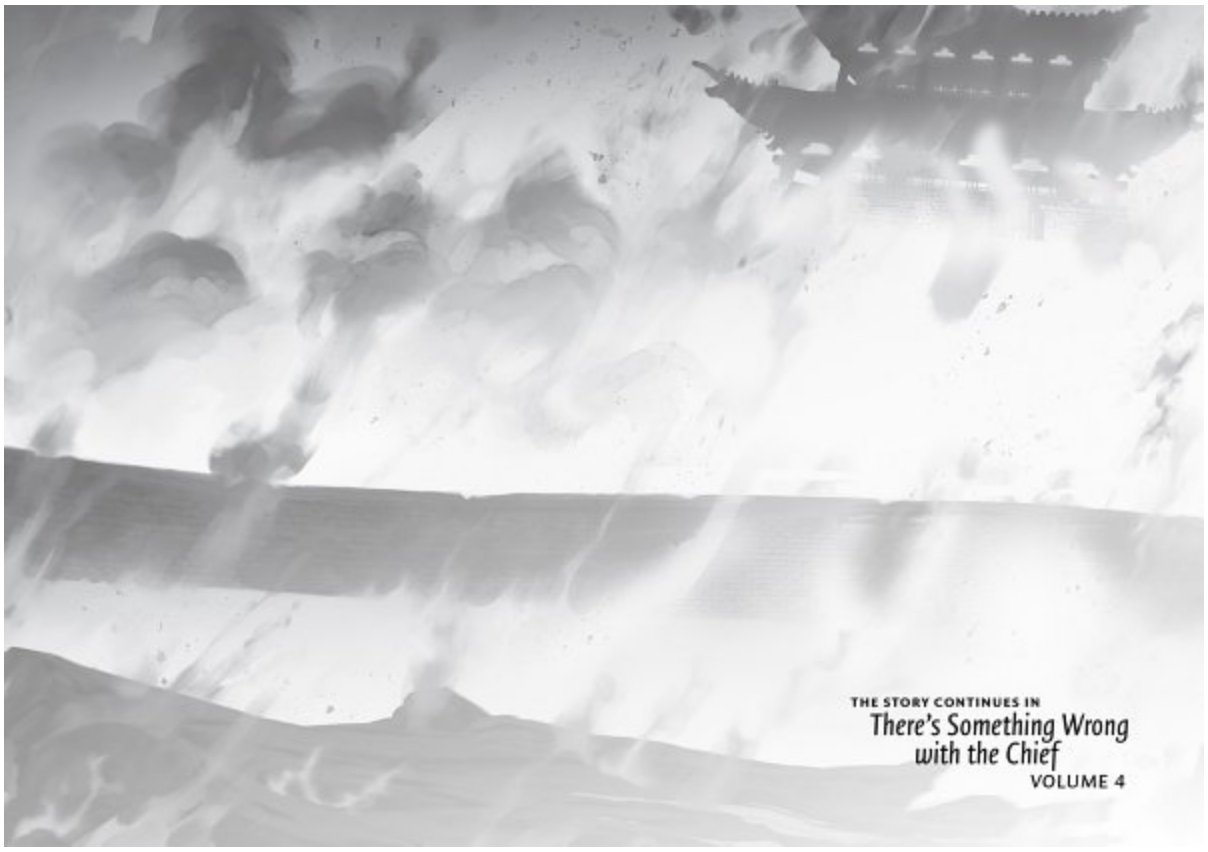
Suddenly, somewhere, a rift burst open, like lightning tearing through darkness. Xiahou Lian opened his eyes. The ghost was behind him!

Steel shrieked as two blades collided in the blackness, sparks flaring for a split second like dying fireworks. In that fleeting glow, Xiahou Lian

saw it: a porcelain mask, its surface brilliant with cold light. Behind it were two eyes devoid of emotion.

The blades parted. The two men stood frozen, separated by iron darkness, staring at what they could not see. Xiahou Lian’s hands tingled from the blade’s impact. The assassin’s strike had been as swift as a dragon’s lunge—only a master could move so fast. Xiahou Lian didn’t need to ask the assassin’s name.

It was the Garuda.


THE STORY CONTINUES IN
There's Something Wrong with the Chief
VOLUME 4

CHARACTER
GUIDE
&
GLOSSARY

HISTORICAL NOTE

There's Something Wrong with the Chief takes place during the fictional Qi dynasty, which is heavily inspired by the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644).

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

SHEN JUE 沈玦: The pseudonym adopted by Xie Jinglan to serve in the palace as a eunuch. Xie Jinglan was the third young master of the Xie family; he is the family's only survivor. A "jue" is a rounded jade pendant.

XIAHOU LIAN 夏侯潋: Originally a young assassin from Qiye Garden. Took vengeance by uprooting the Garden. Played Xie Jinglan's servant before the Xie family was massacred. His name means "rippling."

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

QIYE GARDEN

XIAHOU PEI 夏侯霈: Xiahou Lian's late mother. Once the Garden's strongest assassin and the Garuda of the Eight Legions. Was armed with Hengbo (横波, "Great Waves").

QIU YE 秋叶: Xiahou Lian's late master. Once the Garden's master of disguise and the Kinnara of the Eight Legions. Was armed with Qiushui (秋水, "Autumn Water").

DUAN JIU 段九: An assassin once close to Xiahou Lian (who called him "Uncle Duan").

SHIXIN BUDDHA 弒心佛陀: Xiahou Lian's late father. Once the abbot in charge of the Garden.

CHIYAN 持厌: Xiahou Lian's older twin brother. An assassin from the Garden. Armed with Chana (刹那, "Instant").

SHU QING 书情: Xiahou Lian’s shidi. Qiu Ye’s final disciple.

EUNUCHS AND THE EASTERN DEPOT

WEI DE 魏德: The leader of the Directorate of Ceremonial. Extremely powerful at court. Ordered the massacre of the Xie family. Godfather to multiple eunuchs, including Shen Jue.

SITU JIN 司徒谨: An Eastern Depot battalion commander serving Shen Jue. Practices the Blizzard Saber style.

SHEN WENXING 沈问行: A young eunuch. Shen Jue’s godson.

XU RUOYU 徐若愚: Chief of the Eastern Depot’s Chen Unit.

ZHU SHUNZI 朱顺子: An Eastern Depot agent.

UNDERWORLD ASSOCIATES

TANG SHIQI 唐十七: Originally from the Tang Clan, a sect specializing in mechanical devices and puppets.

A-CHU 阿雏: The top courtesan of Yunxian Tower. Picked up Xiahou Lian while he was adrift.

IMPERIAL COURT AND ASSOCIATES

MU CHEN 穆琛/PRINCE OF FU 福王: Eldest prince. Son of the emperor and Empress Zhang. Crown prince prior to his leg injury.

MU HENG 穆珩/THE SECOND PRINCE 二殿下: Son of the emperor. Begins the volume as crown prince.

NOBLE CONSORT LI 李贵妃: Mother of the second prince.

ZHUXIA 朱夏: Noble Consort Li’s personal maid.

DAI SHENGYAN 戴圣言: An elderly, upright scholar. Shen Jue and Xiahou Lian’s teacher as children.

BAILI YUAN 百里鸢: A young girl who lives in the north. Marquis of Linbei.

OTHERS

ZHU MINGYUE 朱明月: Situ Jin's wife.

NAME GUIDE

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names or one syllable of a disyllabic name.

-ER: "Child." Affectionate suffix.

ER-: "Second." Form of address for a second-eldest child.

LAO-: "Old." Affectionate prefix.

-GE/-GEGE: "Older brother." Affectionate suffix for any older boy or man. "Dage" is a more respectful, although still casual, variant.

-JIE/-JIEJIE: "Older sister." Affectionate suffix for any older girl or woman.

-DI/-DIDI: "Younger brother." Affectionate suffix for any younger boy or man.

-MEI/-MEIMEI: "Younger sister." Affectionate suffix for any younger girl or woman.

XIAO-: "Small" or "younger." Affectionate prefix for juniors.

LAOGE: A relatively casual combination of "lao-" and "-ge."

-XIONGDI: A generalized "brother." Demonstrates closeness.

Courtesy Addresses

GONGGONG: Polite address for a eunuch serving in the palace. To address a eunuch as "eunuch" rather than "gonggong" is less respectful.

SHAOYE: "Young master." Polite address for young men.

XIANSHENG: Polite address for men. Originally only for those who possessed great learning or who had contributed significantly to society.

SHIFU: One’s teacher or master; for instance, in one’s martial sect.

SHIXIONG: A more senior male member of one’s sect or disciple of one’s master.

SHIDI: A more junior male member of one’s sect or disciple of one’s master.

SHIGE: An older male member of one’s sect or disciple of one’s master.

GLOSSARY

CONCUBINES: In Imperial China, wealthy men commonly took concubines in addition to a wife. The concubines were expected to live with the man and bear him children. In general, more concubines correlated to higher social status. Thus, a wealthy merchant might have two or three concubines, while an emperor might have dozens or even a hundred.

EUNUCHS, THE EASTERN DEPOT, AND THE EMBROIDERED UNIFORM GUARD: Relationships between emperors and their literati officials were often tense. Many emperors raised trusted eunuchs over the imperial ministers, giving the eunuch faction enormous power.

The Eastern Depot, led by eunuchs, was established under those circumstances. It spied on officials, rooting out dissenters. Later, it gained the authority to punish such dissenters through the Embroidered Uniform Guard, the dynasty's secret police. The literati decried the Eastern Depot for their perceived gross abuses of power. The organization remains infamous.

THE JIANGHU: An underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans, and merchants who settle disputes between themselves using their own moral codes.

MEMORIALS: Documents written by officials to the emperor. A memorial followed a strict format determined by the problem it was written to address. Emperors used red ink "vermilion endorsements" to annotate and approve these memorials.

THE NINE-RANK SYSTEM: During certain dynasties, officials were divided into ranks denoting their status within the court. First-rank officials were highest; ninth-rank officials were lowest.

PROSTITUTES AND COURTESANS: In Imperial China, many of these women doubled as entertainers and were able to sing and dance. Those who won the favor of a rich and powerful man could leave their brothel through marriage. Many courtesans were considered to be owned by the Royal Academy, which trained and deployed them. A patron paid for a prostitute's first night in a special deflowering ceremony, which was considered a type of coming of age.

PARADISE/THE PURE LAND: Also known as Sukhavati or the Land of Bliss. Considered to be a realm where no suffering exists. In Mahayana Buddhism, all who believe in Amitabha Buddha are believed to be reborn in this Western paradise after death.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yang Su

A balding girl from the post-90s generation. Good at sleeping, zoning out, and eating. Someone with no grand aspirations in life; writing is her only consistent endeavor. “Life is a journey, and I’m willing to use my pen as my horse and gallop forward.”

Footnotes

Chapter 62: Frost and Dew at Night

[1] The Three Great Camps comprised the Five Armies Camp, Three Thousand Camp, and Divine Mechanisms Camp. They were responsible for protecting the capital and emperor during the Ming dynasty.

Chapter 63: A Heart of Snow and Ice

[2] Silver needles were commonly used to test for poison, because most forms of arsenic contained sulfides that caused silver to turn black.

Chapter 65: A Toast in Celebration

[3] “Qingliu” (“clear running water”) is used figuratively to refer to an uncorrupted, honorable person. The faction of “upright officials” at court use this name.

[4] A rural honorific for the second-eldest son.

[5] From “To Huang Jifu” by Song dynasty poet Huang Tingjian.

Chapter 67: An Unquenchable Flame

[6] The emperor would write his comments and approvals in red ink on submitted memorials.

Chapter 68: Petals Floating Along the Water

[7] Erotic art hung in places at risk of burning. The god of fire was said to be embarrassed to see these images.

[8] A government agency for the training and deployment of musicians, dancers, and actors. Women sent to the Academy were considered state-owned entertainers and sex workers.

Chapter 69: A Heart Cold as Iron

[9] A Western Han dynasty diplomat captured on a mission to the north. He only managed to return home after living in servitude herding sheep for nineteen years.

Chapter 71: Lost on a Forked Road

[10] The signature blade of the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

[11] Proverb in the Yuan dynasty Zuan Kuai Tong stating that one must be loyal to those who show one favor.

Chapter 75: Blazing Beauty

[12] A type of European cannon introduced to China during the Ming dynasty.

Chapter 77: Twin Desires Under a Silken Canopy

[13] In Chinese tradition, Guanyin is the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Multiple manifestations, including the Child-Granting Guanyin and Lotus-Holding Guanyin, are venerated.

[14] A euphemism for a eunuch’s castrated phallus and testicles. Castrators preserved these so that a eunuch could be buried as a “complete corpse” upon their death.

Chapter 78: A Lone Shadow Now Paired

[15] A plaque at which one can offer incense and worship in hopes that the individual represented by the plaque will live a long life. These plaques often honor individuals who did the purchaser a great favor.

Chapter 80: The Crumbling Tower

[16] In this context, “conspired” is a confession of intimacy.

Chapter 81: Autumn’s Late Bloom

[17] A large drum hung outside the palace that people could strike to submit a grievance directly to the emperor, though using it recklessly meant severe punishment.

Chapter 86: Flowers Like Dreams

[18] From “Yearning” by Tang dynasty poet Wang Wei.

Chapter 87: A Kite Soaring Skyward

[19] 4:45 a.m.

"Let me live for you, all right?"

After converging in the capital, Xiahou Lian and Shen Jue soon learn that the imperial court is no safer than the roads that brought them there. Power is shifting perilously, secrets are tightening around them, and Xiahou Lian's attempts to protect himself through deception place him in unexpected danger.

Shaken by the fallout, the two dare to rebuild the bond they once lost. As Xiahou Lian gains a foothold in the Eastern Depot, he and Shen Jue are swept into a storm of treachery and enemies. A once-overlooked pawn has become a deadly adversary, and every step becomes a gamble with their lives.

As peril closes in from all sides, Xiahou Lian and Shen Jue must rely on the fragile trust they've only just begun to reclaim—because this time, it may be the only thing that keeps them alive.

A TRAGIC PAST AND A DEADLY WORLD OF ASSASSINS SPARK A LOVE THAT DEFIES FATE IN THIS FAN-FAVORITE DANMEI.

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